

Italian Army Elite Units & Special Forces 1940–43



P. CROCIANI & P. P. BATTISTELLI

ILLUSTRATED BY J. SHUMATE

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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ITALIAN ARMY ELITE UNITS & SPECIAL FORCES 1940–43

INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Italian Army's elite and special forces date back to World War I, when the Arditi assault troops were formed, and foreign volunteer units were raised from former prisoners of war from the national minorities of the Austrian-Hungarian empire – Czechs, Poles and Romanians. In their different ways both these types of unit provided a nucleus of elite and special forces to the Italian Army, but their unique experiences of combat were lost to the army after the end of the war.¹

Foreign volunteer units were disbanded, mostly returning to their homelands to provide a core for their new national forces. The Arditi were also disbanded, but their veterans evolved into a kind of political movement; eventually they would provide the core of the Fascist organization, and its armed wing, the *Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN – commonly called the *Camicie Nere*, 'Blackshirts') claimed to continue their traditions. During the inter-war years, when financial constraints limited technical and organizational innovations, none of the Italian armed forces would develop any elite units or special forces. This was partly due to unease over the political path taken by the Arditi veterans, but mainly because of the Italian high command's traditional distaste for any units that might enjoy a degree of special status, independence or operational freedom. The command doctrine was firmly 'top-down', and would not countenance any initiatives from the lower echelons.

Even the Army's existing 'elite' units enjoyed that status only to a distinctly limited extent. The Alpini mountain troops were set apart in two respects – by their recruitment, limited to the Alpine region and part of the Appennines; and by their specific training for mountain warfare – but they were not allowed any freedom to develop independent initiatives. Even the Bersaglieri ('sharpshooters' or light infantry), which were intended to create the bulk of the Italian motorized infantry, lacked both the equipment and the specific training necessary to turn them into a real elite. In most armies except the German *Heer*, the armoured branches that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s long remained subordinate to the traditional arms of service before

1 See Osprey Men-at-Arms 387, *The Italian Army of World War I*; MAA 447, *The Czech Legion 1914–20*; and Warrior 87, *Italian Arditi – Elite Assault Troops 1917–20*

achieving any degree of organizational independence, and in the Italian army this branch was formed as a specialized wing of the infantry.

It was only after Italy's entry into World War II in June 1940 that any significant changes took place. In Italy's main theatre of war, North Africa, some Army units emerged from the crucible of the early battles as a genuine elite that proved themselves capable of fighting like comparable German or British Commonwealth units. The term 'elite' as used here must be understood in that context: it refers to formations and units whose mission and performance set them apart from the mass of the Italian Army. Some elite and special units were newly created, following either foreign models – as in the case of the *Paracadutisti* paratroopers and the *Guastatori* assault engineers – or that of the World War I *Arditi*, as in the case of the *Alpini* ski battalion. Units of foreign volunteers were also raised, following the more familiar path explored in the Great War. Lack of suitable equipment, and in many cases of proper training and of specific skills (if not of willingness), produced mixed results; but in every case these initiatives and combat experiences deserve to be recalled.

ELITE FORMATIONS & UNITS: ARMoured & MOTORIZED DIVISIONS

OVERVIEW

The birth of the Italian armoured and motorized force as a separate entity took place only in the first months of 1939, following the creation – either by transforming existing divisions, or by expanding existing armoured brigades – of the first *divisioni corazzate* (armoured divisions) and *divisioni motorizzate* (motorized infantry divisions). The first one whose formation was announced was the 132^a Divisione Corazzata Ariete ('Ram'), on 1 February 1939, followed on 20 April 1939 by the 131^a Divisione Corazzata Centauro ('Centaur'). The third armoured division, the 133^a Divisione Corazzata Littorio, was initially intended to be an infantry division, and was only formed in November 1939 (the title referred to the lictors of ancient Rome, who carried the *fascio* – the bundled rods and axe that was the symbol of the Fascist Party). The creation of the first motorized formation, the 102^a Divisione Motorizzata Trento, was announced on 2 January 1939, followed on 4 April by the 101^a Divisione Motorizzata Trieste (both named after cities in northern Italy annexed after the end of World War I).

Both the armoured and the motorized divisions were grouped together into the short-lived *Corpo d'Armata Corazzato* (armoured army corps).



Major Paolo Caccia Dominioni, the commanding officer of the XXXI Battaglione Guastatori (31st Assault Engineer Bn), photographed in Egypt in 1942. This unit distinguished itself at heavy cost, fighting in both battles of Tobruk and, alongside the paratroopers of the Folgore Division, at El Alamein. Note the *Alpini* hat of this officer's parent corps, the *Sahariana* jacket with distinctive shoulder boards, and the dagger characteristic of Italian elite and special forces – see Plate E1. Caccia Dominioni would return to El Alamein after the war, to collect the bodies of the fallen of all armies, and eventually to build the Italian memorial. (Piero Crociani Collection)



A Bersagliere motorcyclist in the Western Desert. From January 1940 one motorcycle and two motorized infantry battalions of 8th Bersaglieri Regt served in North Africa with the Ariete Armoured Division, and that summer the three battalions of the 9th Bersaglieri arrived in theatre with the Trieste Motorized Infantry Division. This soldier wears standard M40 European grey-green woollen uniform, with the Royal Italian Army's national star of Savoy set on the crimson 'two-flame' collar patches of the Bersaglieri, and an M33 steel helmet with the Bersaglieri plume of cockerel feathers fixed to the right side. His slung weapon is the folding-bayonet 6.5mm Model 1891 Mannlicher-Carcano carbine. (Piero Crociani Collection)

This was intended to form, alongside the Corpo d'Armata Celere ('fast corps', i.e. cavalry), and the Corpo d'Armata Autotrasportabile ('truck-borne corps' – although its units in fact lacked the necessary motor transport), the main strategic reserve, under control of the 6^a Armata or Armata Po. The fate of these commands and formations, and the subsequent raising of other armoured and motorized units during the war, revealed a piecemeal, fragmented and badly managed employment of the Italian Army's mechanized assets, such as they were. The 6^a Armata was transferred to southern Italy in February 1941,

losing its supposed status as a '*masse de manoeuvre*', and all its units. (Its HQ was eventually used to defend Sicily in July 1943 against the Allied invasion, before retiring to the Italian mainland after surrendering battlefield command to the Germans.) The Corpo d'Armata Corazzato was never deployed on the battlefield as such, and on 1 March 1941 became the XVII Corpo d'Armata, eventually redeployed to Albania as an infantry command. Both the Corpo d'Armata Celere and the Corpo d'Armata Autotrasportabile took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941; the former was subsequently redeployed to the Eastern Front and transformed into the Corpo di Spedizione in Russia (Expeditionary Corps in Russia) in July 1941, and the latter, deployed in northern Italy and southern France, was renamed XXII Corpo d'Armata on 10 May 1942.

The 131^a Divisione Centauro was deployed to Albania before June 1940, and on 28 October 1940 was part of the Italian force that attacked Greece. In June 1941, at the end of the Greek campaign, the division returned to Italy for reorganization, a process lasting until October 1942. It was then transferred to Tripoli in North Africa; subsequently it fought in Tunisia, finally being disbanded on 18 April 1943. The 133^a Divisione Corazzata Littorio took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, and was back in Italy for reorganization in May. Moved to North Africa in January 1942, it was sent to the front line only that July; deployed at El Alamein, it was destroyed in October–November 1942, and subsequently disbanded.

It was intended to create two more armoured divisions during the war, but these existed only on paper: the 134^a Divisione Corazzata (to be formed from the 2^a Divisione Celere, cavalry), and the 136^a Divisione Corazzata 'Giovani Fascisti' ('Young Fascists' – see below). In fact only one further armoured division was actually formed, the 135^a Divisione Corazzata Ariete II; created in April 1943, it saw action only against the Germans during the defence of Rome in September 1943 following the Italian capitulation to the Allies. The so-called 136^a Divisione Corazzata Legionaria ('Legionary Armoured Division') Centauro II was created on 15 August 1943 by renaming the existing 1^a Divisione Corazzata 'M' of the Blackshirts militia



(see below). Deployed in the area of Rome in September 1943, it did not fight against the Germans.

The same pattern was repeated with the motorized infantry divisions. On 15 July 1941 the 10^a Divisione Motorizzata Piave was formed from the existing infantry division of that name. It was only active in November 1942, during the occupation of southern France, and in September 1943 in Rome. The 16^a Divisione Motorizzata Pistoia, formed on 10 October 1941 from the existing infantry division, was deployed to Libya in August–September 1942 and eventually fought in Tunisia, where it was destroyed in May 1943.

The same fragmentary employment also affected both the Ariete and Trieste divisions in the early stages of the war.

Tank crews in Libya receive mail from home; the early version of the blue tank-crew overall is clearly visible, as are the grey-green *bustina* field cap of European uniform and the peaked version, which were widely used in North Africa – see Plate A1. (Private collection)

132^a DIVISIONE CORAZZATA ARIETE, 1940–41

Together with the usual headquarters and service elements, the division's major units on formation were as follows:

32° Reggimento Carristi (tank regiment – I, II & III Battalions)

8° Reggimento Bersaglieri (motorized infantry – III Motorcycle Bn; V & XII Motorized Bns; plus 132^a Compagnia Controcarri anti-tank company – 47/32 guns)

132° Reggimento Artiglieria (I & II battalion-sized Gruppi – 75/27 guns)

132^a Compagnia Mista Genio (mixed sapper & signals company)

The 32° Reggimento Carristi, whose first two battalions were amongst the first to be equipped with the new M11/39 medium tanks in the summer of 1939, completed its organization in July 1940 when its III Battalion was equipped with the new M13/40 tanks. However, in the same period both the I and II Battalions were detached and sent to Libya, followed by III Bn in September, and the 32° Reggimento was then reorganized anew with three battalions of L3/35 'fast tanks' – in fact, two-man tankettes armed only with 2x 8mm machine guns. The medium tank battalions, now part of the Babini Armoured Brigade (named after its commander), were subsequently destroyed in February 1941 at Beda Fomm, where many of their 112 medium



An M13/40 of VII (Medium) Tank Bn shortly after being landed in Tripoli in March 1941, to join 32nd Tank Regt of the Ariete Division. It is camouflaged with green streaks over sand-yellow. The rectangular patch painted on the hull side identified the 1st–3rd Companies of a battalion by colour (red, blue, yellow); one, two or three white vertical stripes on the patch denoted the platoon; and a white number painted above the patch (absent here) identified the individual tank. Here the Roman battalion number is painted below the patch – which was not normal when in the field. The officer is wearing the grey-green pre-war European uniform, with black sidestripes on the breeches. (Piero Crociani Collection)

tanks had to be abandoned for lack of fuel. Meanwhile the Ariete Division – still equipped only with tankettes – arrived in Tripoli as the first element of the reinforcements shipped to North Africa following the defeats suffered at the hands of Gen O'Connor's British offensive (Operation *Compass*) in December 1940.

The Ariete started to arrive in Tripoli on 24 January 1941; its 32° Reggimento Carristi had 93x L3/35 tankettes plus 24x L3/Lf fitted with flamethrowers. On 7 March the division was deployed to the Agedabia area, close to the front line. A few days later, from 11 March, VII Tank Bn began to arrive in Tripoli with 46x M13/40 tanks, but before this unit could be incorporated into the 32° Reggimento the Ariete Division had already had its baptism of fire. On 3 April 1941, the second day of Gen Rommel's counteroffensive in Cyrenaica, the division took part in the advance that was to end a week later on the Libyan–Egyptian frontier, though short of the vital fortified port of Tobruk. Two battlegroups took the lead: the Colonna Fabris (formed around III/8° Bersaglieri and I/132° Artiglieria), and Colonna Montemurro (formed around XII/8° Bersaglieri). By 8 April the Ariete reached Mechili, and had its first real combat experience when 3rd Indian Motor Brigade lost some 1,200 men to the Colonna Montemurro and the German 5th Panzer Regiment.

This first engagement proved the value of the Ariete units, even though under favourable conditions; but the experiences that followed, when they were thrown against the 9th Australian Division holding the Tobruk perimeter, were less encouraging. The first probes on 14–18 April in the Ras el Medauar area (Hill 209) ended in failure, as did the German-Italian attacks of 30 April–4 May. The Ariete took part in these actions without



TOP

A member of an M13/40 tank crew inspecting the engine, wearing the complete tank crew clothing: black leather crash helmet, long black leather jacket over his blue overalls, and the cavalry-style ammunition bandolier across his chest to the left shoulder. (Piero Crociani Collection)

MIDDLE

Bersaglieri on the march, wearing a mixture of uniform items and pulling a small handcart laden with their backpacks. Some men are wearing the pith helmet with feathers, some without, and a few the steel helmet. (ACS)



BOTTOM

Bersaglieri on parade, presenting arms with the standard folding-bayonet 6.5mm M91 carbine. They wear the *camiciotto Sahariano* field jacket, and in this case the mounted and mechanized troops' diagonal bandolier rather than the standard infantry belt pouches. The VIII Armoured Bersaglieri Bn, equipped with armoured cars, served with the Trieste Division from April 1942. (ACS)

the Colonna Montemurro, which was still deployed on the Egyptian frontier at Sollum, but was reinforced by the 2° Reggimento Artiglieria Celere (truck-borne artillery), and the XXXII Battaglione Guastatori (see below). While the losses suffered during the Ras el Medauar battle were only 275 killed, wounded and missing, casualties mounted, and the Ariete was soon a worn-out force. Both the III/8° and V/8° Bersaglieri were reduced to a single company each, while the three tankette battalions of the 32° Reggimento had fewer than 40 'runners', and VII Bn (which had now arrived with the regiment) had only five medium tanks left. During the lull in operations that followed, the division started a reorganization that would see the eventual creation of the first – and only – genuinely elite Italian mechanized formation of World War II.

Following the arrival in Libya from late June 1941 of VIII Tank Bn, the tank units of the Ariete were reorganized.





A good close-up of a sergeant of the 8th Bersaglieri Regt, Ariete Division. The shirt-type collar identifies the *camiciotto Sahariano*, displaying the Bersaglieri's crimson collar 'flames' and the sergeant's yellow rank badge on the sleeve. His pith helmet bears the cockerel-feather plume of his corps, and, on the large national *tricolore* cockade, its brass badge of a buglehorn, on crossed rifles, on a grenade with large flames billowing to the right. (Piero Crociani Collection)

While 32° Reggimento was left with the original three tankette battalions (I–III), a new 132° Reggimento Carristi was formed in September with two (from October, three) medium battalions (VII, VIII and IX/132°). In mid-July there were 113x L3 tankettes and 91x M13/40 tanks on strength, and in mid-October, 97x L3 and 141x M13/40s.

CORPO D'ARMATA DI MANOVRA, 1941

While the Ariete Division started to re-train, on 15 August 1941 the HQ of the Corpo d'Armata di Manovra ('Manoeuvre Army Corps', CAM) was formed, to include the Ariete and the newly arrived 101^a Divisione Motorizzata Trieste. The latter replaced the 102^a Divisione Trento as the motorized

infantry component of the corps, since, following its arrival in Libya in March 1941, Trento had suffered heavy casualties and lost a good deal of its motor transport. (Trento would eventually be reorganized as an infantry *divisione tipo Africa Settentrionale* 1942 – 'North Africa Type 1942 division'.)

The Trieste Division, like the Ariete, had suffered from piecemeal deployment. In October–November 1940 its HQ and 21° Reggimento Artiglieria Motorizzata (I & II with 75/27 guns, III with 100/17 guns) were sent to Albania, where they formed the Divisione Alpina Speciale ('Special Mountain Division'). It was late March 1941 before the division was assembled in Italy, with the artillery joining the other major units:

65° Reggimento Fanteria Motorizzata (motorized infantry – 3 battalions)
66° Reggimento Fanteria Motorizzata (3 bns)

A ARMoured VEHICLE CREWS

1: *Carrista, VII Battaglione Carri M; Ariete Division, 1941*

The VII M (for medium) Tank Battalion, equipped with M13/40s, was hurriedly shipped over to Libya in March 1941, and the crews still wore European uniforms; note the grey-green field cap and shirt and the black ankle boots shown here. The cap has the branch badge (flaming grenade, on upright crossed cannons, above tank symbol) embroidered in yellow thread on the front. Basic combat clothing for the crews of armoured fighting vehicles was a simple blue overall, available in different shades, although the cut was always the same; note the integral cloth belt often worn tied rather than buttoned, and the Royal Army's white national star on the collar. Usually this bandolier for mounted and motorized troops was also worn.

2: *Capitano, Raggruppamento Esplorante Corazzato Nizza Cavalleria; Ariete Division, 1942*

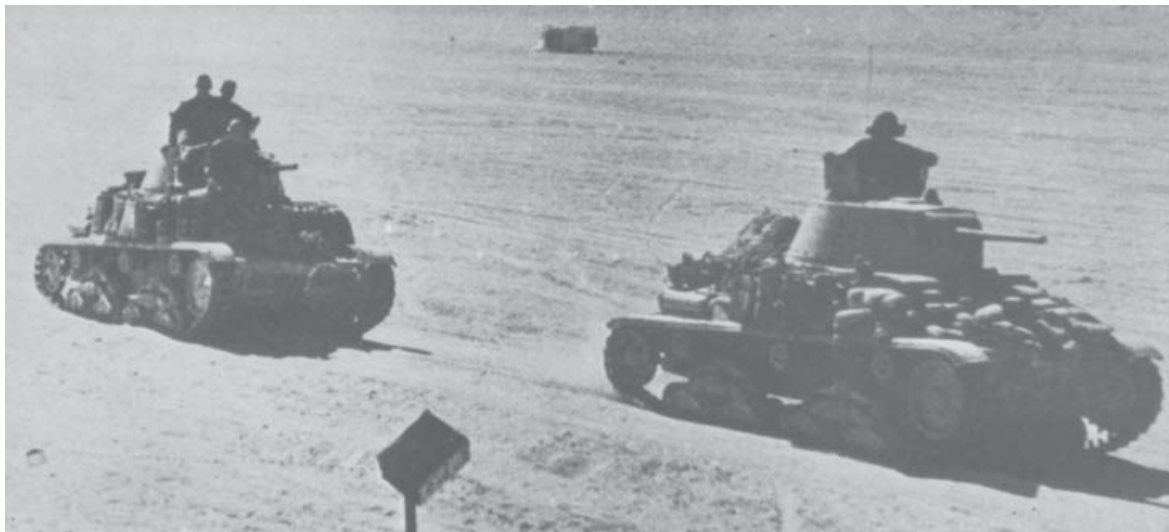
Following reorganization in early 1942 the Ariete Division had an armoured car reconnaissance unit formed from the Nizza cavalry regiment. Armoured car crews wore the same clothing and equipment as tank crews, including the three-quarter length black leather double-breasted jacket common to mechanized and motorized units. Here it is worn directly over

standard khaki tropical uniform – more common and in some cases more practical than the overalls. Note the silver collar star, and the captain's rank insignia – embroidered in yellow on grey-green – attached to the forearms. Over the jacket's integral belt this officer wears the regulation 'Sam Browne', with a holstered Beretta M34 and a compass case; he also carries binoculars and a map case. His scarf is in the Nizza regimental colour, crimson, and his cap bears the dragoon branch badge (a flaming grenade).

3: *Sergente, VIII Battaglione Bersaglieri Corazzato; Trieste Division, 1942*

The spring 1942 reorganization brought this light infantry armoured car unit into the divisional order of battle. A new series of AFV crew overalls, in several different styles, had by now introduced improvements such as a zipped front and zipped thigh pockets, and padded protection at the knees and elbows. It now became common practice to attach rank insignia to the chest above the left pocket. The leather AFV crash helmet, here with characteristic Bersaglieri plume of cockerel feathers, was very popular with the crews given the cramped interiors of Italian vehicles, although it was not very practical or sturdy. Note the Italian copy of the German 20-litre 'jerrycan', which might be marked 'ACQUA' (water).





Two M14/41 tanks in the Western Desert, well laden with fuel and water cans, and with a large number of sandbags on the front hull to increase protection. The M14/41 was a development of the M13/40 with a more powerful 145hp petrol engine than the latter's 125hp diesel, and improved air filters, but unchanged armour. (P.P. Battistelli Collection)

9° Reggimento Bersaglieri (XXXII Motorcycle Bn, XXVIII & XXX Motorized Bns)

LII Battaglione Misto Genio

In addition to the Ariete and Trieste divisions, the CAM included a mixed reconnaissance group designated Raggruppamento Esplorante del CAM. This RECAM comprised the Reggimento Fanteria 'Giovani Fascisti' ('Young Fascists'); the Battaglione 'Romolo Gessi' of the Polizia dell'Africa Italiana (Italian Africa Police, PAI); the LII Tank Bn with mediums, and the III/32° Carristi battalion, now with a mixture of armoured cars and tankettes; plus two battalions of 65/17 guns. By mid-November 1941 the Ariete Division had a total strength of about 6,200 all ranks, with 63 tankettes and 141 medium tanks; the Trieste Division had a total strength of about 11,000 men; and the RECAM had 43 tankettes and 19 medium tanks, plus 23 armoured cars.

The Manoeuvre Corps would face the test of battle during the next British offensive, Gen Auchinleck's Operation *Crusader*, which opened on 18 November 1941. The battles that followed produced mixed results for the

General Arnaldo Azzi, commander of the Trieste Division, entering Tobruk on 21 June 1942 after the surrender of the South African garrison. Note the Italian flag spread over the front of his field car as a ground-air recognition sign. (Piero Crociani Collection)





After the fall of Tobruk in June 1942 Italian units – like the German Afrika Korps – acquired a large number of British vehicles, and these captures were particularly valuable to the under-equipped Italian motorized units. Here, Bersaglieri send two POWs to the rear in a Bedford MWD 15cwt lorry. (ACS)

CAM; the corps demonstrated both a good level of combat experience, and the inadequacies of Italian equipment and command systems. The first day's battle at Bir el Gubi, fought between the bulk of the Ariete Division and the British 22nd Armoured Brigade, was a success for the former regardless of the actual losses (still debated; according to British sources the Italians lost 34 tanks, eight 47/32 guns and some 170 men, and 22nd Armd Bde lost 25 tanks, while Italian sources list 50 British tank losses). However, Ariete's failure to follow up the German advance against the 5th South African Bde, which ended with its destruction on 23 November, revealed sloppy Italian communications and command systems. The splitting of the CAM, with the Trieste Division deployed around Tobruk and the Ariete trying to follow the Afrika Korps during Rommel's 'dash to the wire' of 24 November, also accounted for the unimpressive Italian performance in this stage of the fighting. Nevertheless, the performance of the Trieste against the New Zealand attacks during the second battle of Sidi Rezegh, and that of both the Trieste and the Ariete during the second battle of Bir el Gubi in the first days of December, were altogether good.



A typical Italian defensive position in the desert, manned by Bersaglieri; the gun in the background is a 20mm Breda 35 cannon. (ACS)

On 8 December 1941 the exhausted Axis forces withdrew west of Tobruk, whose British garrison had broken out and linked up with the forces advancing from Egypt, and by the end of the month they were back at Agedabia west of the great 'bulge' of Cyrenaica, where the first Italian-German offensive had started the previous April. Both the Ariete and the Trieste had taken very heavy losses – some 4,700 men from the former, and 8,600 from the latter. At the end of December 1941, Ariete had only some 1,500 men (with three M13/40 tanks in running order), and Trieste about 2,200 men.

XX CORPO D'ARMATA, 1942

During the first months of 1942, following Rommel's second advance to Tobruk and the preparations for the attack on the Gazala Line, the Italian forces underwent a major reorganization that affected both divisions. The doctrine now was 'more weapons, fewer men', with each infantry division being reshaped as a 'North Africa Type 1942 division' with an established strength of about 7,000. The Ariete and the Trieste were the only formations to be given establishments of their own. The Ariete had a total established strength of some 8,300 men with 1,000 vehicles, about 210 light and medium tanks plus 20 self-propelled guns, 47 armoured cars, 42 anti-tank guns and 32 artillery pieces. The Trieste was some 6,700 strong with 830 vehicles, 52 medium tanks, 47 armoured cars, 36 AT guns and 48 artillery pieces. In January 1942 the Corpo Armata di Manovra lost the RECAM (disbanded, as was its PAI battalion), and *recce* units were now attached directly to the divisions. Eventually, on 10 March 1942, the CAM was redesignated XX Corpo d'Armata.

The Ariete Division now had the newly formed RECo (Raggruppamento Esplorante Corazzato, armoured *recce* group), comprising LII Tank Bn with mediums, and a cavalry armoured car unit, III Gruppo Corazzato Nizza. The old 32° Reggimento Carristi was disbanded in January, as was IX Tank Battalion. The 132° Reggimento Carristi was reorganized with VII, VIII and X Tank Bns, the last being transferred on 10 April from the Littorio Division.

The 8° Reggimento Bersaglieri kept both its V and XII Motorized Bns, but III/8° was to be reorganized as an anti-tank unit. The division also had an attached AT battalion, IV Battaglione Controcarri. The 132° Reggimento Artiglieria added to its three towed battalions (I & II with 75/27 guns, III with 105/28) the V & VI Battaglioni Semoventi da 75/18 (formerly DLI and DLII 75/18 Self-Propelled Gun Bns); and CXXXII Battaglione Misto Genio (mixed engineer/signals battalion) now had two companies (132^a sappers and 232^a communications).

The Trieste Division retained its 65° and 66° Reggimenti Fanteria Motorizzata (now with two battalions each), but in late March 1942 lost the 9° Reggimento Bersaglieri (which

The Bersaglieri crew of a 47/32 anti-tank gun emplaced among rocks, 1942; note in the background the Bersagliere wearing the corps' soft crimson fez. Originally an anti-tank company was attached to the Ariete Division's 8th Bersaglieri Regt, but early in 1942 that regiment's whole III Bn was converted to this role, and the division received a second attached AT battalion. (P.P. Battistelli Collection)





became a corps asset), while acquiring VIII Battaglione Bersaglieri Corazzato (an armoured car unit) and the medium tanks of XI Battaglione Carristi M. The 21° Reggimento Artiglieria (I & II Gruppi with 100/17 guns, III with 75/27), and the XXXII Battaglione Misto Genio, were retained unaltered. Before Rommel's attacks against the Gazala Line began on 27 May 1942, the Ariete had an actual strength of about 6,700 men with 137 medium tanks, 30 self-propelled guns and 38 armoured cars; the Trieste was about 6,600 strong, with 29 medium tanks and 31 armoured cars. Although neither was at full strength, these divisions were the only Italian formations that were nearly up to their establishment.

The reorganization and retraining of the Ariete and Trieste proved their value. On 27 May the XX Corpo d'Armata, controlling both divisions, formed the left wing of Rommel's hook around the southern end of the Gazala Line; the Ariete practically overran the 3rd Indian Bde, while the Trieste attacked between Bir Hakeim and the British 150th Bde 'box'. The Ariete was heavily engaged along with the Afrika Korps in the battle for the 'Cauldron', while the Trieste attacked the Free French position at Bir Hakeim along with the German 90th Light Division. Both divisions of XX Corpo saw hard fighting on 12–13 June in the 'Knightsbridge' battles. On 20 June both divisions took part in the capture of Tobruk, although they failed to penetrate its defences to the same depth as German units. Three days later they crossed the frontier into Egypt along with the Panzer units of the Afrika Korps. At Mersa Matruh, on 26–29 June, XX Corpo d'Armata formed the right wing of Rommel's successful attack.

On 1 July 1942, its role in the planned attack against Gen Auchinleck's embryo Alamein 'line' was to strike at the centre, turn south on Ruweisat Ridge, and take Auchinleck's southern forces in the rear. This 'first battle of Alamein' opened on 2 July, but the following day the Italian thrust got stuck on Ruweisat Ridge. The New Zealand Division's subsequent counter-attacks cost the Ariete 531 men, 36 guns and 55 vehicles. Although fighting continued until the end of July, any chance to break through before resting and re-equipping Rommel's army was lost. On 1 August 1942 the Ariete Division was back up to some 7,200 men, but had only 56 tanks, 11 armoured cars and 21 self-propelled guns. The Trieste Division was still understrength in both men and armour; it had only 5,300 all ranks, 6 tanks and 16 armoured cars.

M13/40s of X Tank Bn, 132nd Tank Regt from the Ariete Division, photographed near Mechili in spring 1942. The tank's 47mm main gun was effective, but in the two-man turret the commander had to double as the gunner. The M13/40 was also slow, underpowered, and mechanically fairly unreliable. Its fixed gun mantlet had large, vulnerable elevation slots for the 47/32 and the co-axial machine gun, the bolted armour was inadequate, and the design of the turret hatches hampered emergency escapes. Well aware of these limitations, the crews showed a determination in battle that earned them a genuinely elite status. A famous example of their bravery was noted on 10 July 1942, when Capt Vittorio Bulgarelli's 3ª Compagnia/XI Battaglione Carristi attacked towards Hill 33 across two miles of flat ground under continuous fire from British 25-pdrs and 6-pdr AT guns. Of the 19 tanks committed, 17 were destroyed; the last M13/40 ran on alone until it passed out of sight over the ridge – it was eventually found in 1949, abandoned in a minefield. (Private collection)



A corporal of the 'Giovani Fascisti' Regt, unusually armed with a coveted M38A sub-machine gun. Note the skull-and-dagger symbol on the display board. (Piero Crociani Collection)

Once again, the XX Corpo was to form the left wing of Rommel's great southern hook towards Alam Halfa; fighting started on 31 August, but this time neither the Germans nor the Italians had the strength to break through, and four days later the units were back at their starting positions.

On the eve of Gen Montgomery's October 1942 offensive from the Alamein line the Ariete Division was about 6,100 strong, with 117 tanks and 17 self-propelled guns, while the Trieste mustered 4,900 men and 33 tanks. With 21st Panzer Division, the Ariete formed the southern mobile defence group; Trieste was deployed up near the coast, along with the German 90th Light Afrika Division. On 4 November, when the beaten Axis forces started their withdrawal, the Ariete was surrounded and destroyed. On 8 December 1942 the

division was officially disbanded, leaving only the rebuilt 8° Reggimento Bersaglieri (with X, XII & LVII Bns), which eventually formed the nucleus for the 'paper' 136^a Divisione Corazzata 'Giovani Fascisti'.

TRIESTE DIVISION, 1943

Heavily engaged in counter-attacks against the British breakthrough, the Trieste Division had lost the 65° Fanteria and XI Battaglione Carristi, plus most of the 21° Artiglieria. In Tunisia in February 1943 the Trieste was reorganized as a North Africa Type 1942 infantry division, with the rebuilt 65° and 66° Fanteria. The former regiment's I Bn was formed from the remnants of the old regiment, II Bn from remnants of the Bologna Division, and III Bn from remnants of the Trento Division. Of the 66° Fanteria, I Bn



A group of the 'Young Fascists' on parade with the pennant of the regiment's I Bn, wearing their soft black fez with a hanging tassel, and armed with the 6.5mm M91 TS (for 'special troops') carbine with a long knife-bayonet. (Piero Crociani Collection)

was the only unit left intact; the new II/66° was made up from remnants of IV Battaglione Controcarro and of the Folgore Division (see below), which also formed the III/66°. The 21° Artiglieria survived, but the division's XI Battaglione Carristi and VIII Battaglione Bersaglieri Corazzato were not rebuilt. Trieste fought against the British Eighth Army in Tunisia early in 1943 – first on the Mareth line, then at Wadi Akarit, and eventually on the Enfidaville line. Upon the final Axis surrender on 13 May 1943 the remnants of the division were disbanded.

* * *

Although neither was an elite or special unit, and both lacked either special training or equipment, two units mentioned above as serving with the CAM's reconnaissance group both distinguished themselves on the battlefield.

REGGIMENTO 'GIOVANI FASCISTI'

The Gruppo Battaglioni 'Giovani Fascisti' ('Young Fascists' Battalion Group) was formed on 18 April 1941, at first with three, later with two battalions. It was the only non-elite or special unit of the Italian Army to be entirely made up of volunteers; in their late teens, these all came from the Fascist youth organization Fasci Giovanili di Combattimento. Sent to Libya in July 1941, this infantry unit was strengthened with two AT-gun and two mortar platoons in September, following subordination to the newly formed RECAM

(continued on page 20)



Motorcyclist of the Italian Africa Police Bn 'Romolo Gessi' delivering a message to the commander of an AB40 armoured car, during the battalion's service with the Manoeuvre Corps' RECAM reconnaissance group between August 1941 and January 1942. Note the two different types of crash helmet, and also the PAI's big triple-pouch ammunition belt; each pouch took three short 20-round magazines for the M38A sub-machine gun, with which the police force was generously equipped. (Piero Crociani Collection)



A first lieutenant and a corporal of the Polizia dell'Africa Italiana, both wearing the Sahariana. The former clearly shows the force's blue aiguillettes and shoulder boards – see Plate B1 – and the latter still wears old-style rank badges. (Piero Crociani Collection)





Two policemen and an officer of the PAI in a North African town; in the uncropped print the car's registration plate 'POLIZIA/AFRICA/ITALIANA 074' can be seen. All three men wear the black leather jacket of motorized and mechanized troops. Points to note include the M38A Type II with a folding knife-bayonet, left; and the PAI motorcyclist's dark brown peaked crash helmet, centre. Both policemen wear woollen European uniform with stiff leather leggings, and both have holstered pistols on their left hips in addition to their sub-machine guns. (Imperial War Museum E7408)

B CORPO D'ARMATA DI MANOVRA & XX CORPS D'ARMATA, 1941–42

1: Maresciallo Capo, PAI Battaglione 'Romolo Gessi'; RECAM, 1941

Personnel of this Polizia dell'Africa Italiana unit serving in the Corpo d'Armata di Manovra's mixed reconnaissance group (RECAM) usually wore the same uniforms and equipment as the Army (apart from a different field cap), with PAI insignia. This warrant officer class 2 wears the standard tropical pith helmet, and the *Sahariana* jacket (in use by all PAI ranks) with its characteristic 'winged' chest pocket flaps. Superimposed on the large tricolour helmet cockade is the PAI badge (cross of Savoy, set against gold crowned eagle); the collar badges are gold *fascies*; this WO wears his shoulder boards of rank (**1a**), and the PAI's azure-blue aiguillettes at the right shoulder. His medal ribbons are for the War Merit Cross, and the Italian Unification commemorative and War Volunteer medals.

2: Sergente Maggiore, 9° Reggimento Bersaglieri; Trieste Division, 1941

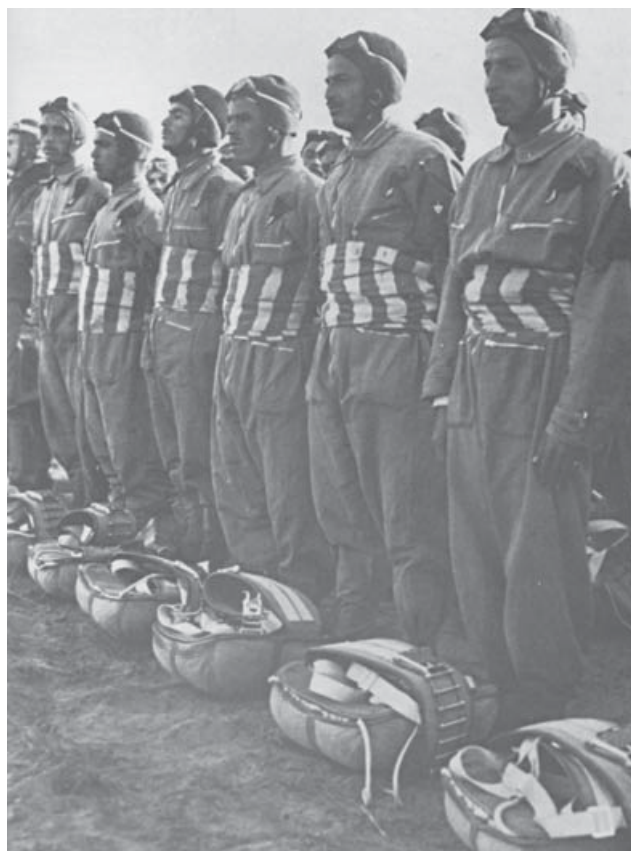
This NCO of the Trieste Division's motorized 9th Bersaglieri Regt displays on his helmet cockade the Bersaglieri badge (buglehorn with regimental number, upright crossed rifles, and grenade with large flames billowing to right), and on

the right side the Bersaglieri cockerel-feathers. The loose pullover field jacket was known as the *camiciotto Sahariano*, although it lacked the 'winged' pocket flaps of the *Sahariana*. It bears his rank on both upper sleeves, in yellow on grey-green. He wears stiff brown leather leggings, common in North Africa, and the tropical version of the mounted troops' bandolier, with a holstered pistol attached. His main weapon is the folding-bayonet 6.5mm Model 1891 Mannlicher-Carcano carbine.

3: Bersagliere, 9° Reggimento Bersaglieri; Trieste Division, 1942

In the heat of the desert this private of the same unit wears only shirt and shorts, wool socks and boots. Although the more comfortable pith helmet was preferred, since he is within range of the dangerous artillery of British Eighth Army he wears the M33 steel helmet, again with Bersaglieri feathers attached. He is one of the three-man crew of an 8mm Breda M37 heavy machine gun; this was a notably reliable weapon, though its rate of fire of 450rpm was somewhat hampered by the fact that the gun's unusual action re-inserted the emptied cartridge cases into the 20-round metal feed strips after firing. The wooden ammo chest was usually marked 'CASSETTA/CARICATORI/MITRAGLIATRICE M 36'.

Libyan 'Air Infantry' paratroopers lined up in jump clothing. Note the unit sash, and the large red-on-blue unofficial qualification badge and old-style rank insignia worn on the khaki overalls with zipped pockets – see Plate C1. The Salvator D37 parachute harness with which the unit initially trained had only a single left shoulder strap and a single right leg strap; accidents exceeded 100, of which 20 were fatal, within the first two months. After a pause in jump training, the moderately improved D39 was issued; this at least had pairs of shoulder and leg straps. (Piero Crociani Collection)



(see above). After the RECAM was disbanded, in January 1942 the 'Giovani Fascisti' were attached at first to the Sabratha Division and, in July, seized the oasis of Siwa. Despite its losses (about 200 in winter 1941, followed by another 240 in summer 1942 – mostly victims of malaria), on 30 August 1942 the 'Giovani Fascisti' officially formed a regiment, while a third (AT) battalion was still forming in Italy. This regiment was intended to be the backbone of a new 136^a Divisione Corazzata 'Giovani Fascisti' (officially in the process of formation since May 1942, this armoured division in fact existed only on paper).

After the battle of Alamein the 'Giovani Fascisti' withdrew to Tunisia, eventually joining the 8^o Reggimento Bersaglieri, 136^o Reggimento Artiglieria, and the X 'M' Blackshirts Battalion in the Mareth Line. On 1 March 1943 they formed the 45^a Divisione Bersaglieri d'Africa, another formation of largely theoretical existence. By the time of the Axis surrender in Tunisia the 'Giovani Fascisti' had lost about 60 per cent of their total strength of 2,387 all ranks.

BATTAGLIONE 'ROMOLO GESSI'

The Polizia dell'Africa Italiana (Italian Africa Police, PAI) was the police force of the Ministry of the Colonies and, as such, was mostly active in Libya and Italian Eastern Africa, with roughly half-and-half Italian and native personnel. Generously equipped with modern weapons, including AB40-41 armoured cars, the PAI was not trained for conventional military operations.

Nevertheless, from May 1941 it formed a combat battalion named after Romolo Gessi (ironically, an officer who had been an aide to the British Gen Gordon in the late 19th century), and this was sent to Libya in September 1941. Comprising two motorcycle companies and one with armoured cars, it was immediately attached to the RECAM. The 'Romolo Gessi' Bn served until it was disbanded, with the rest of RECAM, on 15 January 1942 following heavy losses during the battles of Operation *Crusader*. The remnants formed two companies (one motorcycle, one with mixed motorcycles and armoured cars), which were subsequently put at the disposal of the Libya command for rear area security duties.

PARACADUTISTI

In 1935 Gen Francesco Saverio Grazioli, one of the Italian Army's leading innovators, attended Soviet Red Army exercises, and was greatly impressed by the use of paratroopers. In spite of his very favourable report, interservice differences between the Army and Air Force prevented any early creation of



Marshal Balbo, Governor-General of Libya and creator of the 'Fanti dell'Aria', inspecting the Libyan paratroopers with Marshal De Vecchi. The photo can be dated to some time after April 1939 by the wearing of the Royal Italian Army's national star on the collar, and the new rank insignia introduced at about that date. (Piero Crociani Collection)

an Italian airborne force. In 1936 the Army attempted, but failed, to create a parachute unit. The following year the Air Force was given responsibility for the creation of a paratroop school, but it was more than two years before this instruction was implemented. The Air Force school was only established in August 1939, opening on 15 October at Tarquinia, near Rome, under the title of Regia Scuola Paracadutisti dell'Aeronautica (Royal Air Force Paratrooper School).

FANTI DELL'ARIA

Meanwhile, Air Marshal Italo Balbo, Governor-General of Libya and C-in-C of armed forces in the colony, had taken advantage of his rank and of the independence afforded by his appointment to create the first Italian airborne unit. Early in 1938, on his own initiative, he established his own paratroop school at Castel Benito airfield near Tripoli, followed on 22 March 1938 by the creation of the Battaglione Allievi Paracadutisti 'Fanti dell'Aria' (Paratroop Training Battalion 'Air Infantry'). This unit was formed with volunteers from the Libyan native infantry battalions, along with Italian officers and instructors – an expedient that enabled Balbo to avoid both the bureaucracy and the political opposition that would have impeded him had the unit been formed with Italian personnel.

In the event, Balbo's original plan of creating a 'commando'-style unit, to be dropped in small groups behind enemy lines to carry out sabotage, was never realized, and the battalion was organized like a straightforward infantry unit, with one HQ and four rifle companies. Training started a few weeks after its creation; in April 1939 a second battalion was raised, and on 18 May these units formed the embryo 1° Reggimento Paracadutisti Libici 'Fanti dell'Aria' (1st Libyan Paratroop Regiment 'Air Infantry'). Some time later it took part in the first – and only – major airborne exercise ever held by the Italian armed forces. This included an airdrop to seize a landing zone, where an infantry brigade was subsequently flown in. Given the actual strength of the regiment, with only some 300 Libyan volunteers and about 50 Italian officers, this was quite an achievement. However, this promising beginning was not followed up.

By the end of 1939 the regiment had been disbanded, leaving only the 1st Bn, which joined a second raised from Italian personnel. Soon after

Italian volunteers during the very early stages of parachute training, practising aircraft exits on the beach at Tarquinia. During hot summer weather men trained wearing only shorts, to which any rank badges were attached. (Piero Crociani Collection)



Italy's entry into the war in June 1940 these formed the Gruppo Mobile Tonini (named after its commander); stationed in Cyrenaica, it faced the advance of Gen O'Connor's forces that December. It was deployed in the defence of Derna until 30 January 1941, and when that town was given up the remnants withdrew towards Beda Fomm. There they too surrendered on 6 February, the unit subsequently being disbanded.

BATTAGLIONI PARACADUTISTI

The first 18 months of the Tarquinia paratroop school were unpromising. Although it was opened in October 1939 it was not until late March 1940 that the training of the instructors started, and the first batch of trainees – selected

C PARATROOPERS, 1939–41

1: Libyan Muntaz, *Fanti dell'Aria*, 1939

This Libyan Arab lance-corporal of Air Marshal Balbo's 'Air Infantry' has ten years of service seniority, as denoted by the three red stars on the rank badges worn on both sleeves. Although issued with an overall with zipped front and pockets – worn here with a sash in unit colours, as typical of the Libyan and Colonial troops – the paratroopers lacked some necessary items such as crash helmets and jumpboots and, above all, reliable parachutes. That illustrated, the Salvador Model D39, was at least an improved version of the earlier D37, with pairs of shoulder and leg straps. Balbo tried to bolster *esprit de corps* by awarding in 1938 a large and colourful parachute qualification badge, proudly sported on the left chest. This was unofficial; the regulation badge, similar to that awarded to Italian paratroopers, was officially adopted only in December 1940.

2: Libyan Sciumbasci, *Fanti dell'Aria*, 1938

This sergeant boasts 20 years' service and a field promotion, as shown by the gold star and the crown in the rank badge worn on the upper sleeves. It is repeated on the red fez, with the gold branch badge of the Colonial infantry (buglehorn against

crowned crossed rifles). This NCO wears the Libyan soldiers' greenish-khaki service uniform, with puttees and sandals; the unit sash colours are repeated in slip-on shoulder-strap loops, and again the local parachute brevet is worn on the left chest. The unit's elite status is also indicated by the dagger, following the World War I tradition of the Arditi. Here it is an early Blackshirts militia piece, bearing on the hilt a silver *fascio* and the letters 'MVSN'.

3: *Appuntato*, 1° Battaglione Carabinieri Paracadutisti; Tarquinia, 1941

This lance-corporal of the military police is shown in training at the parachute school after the 3rd Carabinieri Parachute Bn was renumbered 1st, to preserve the traditional precedence of this branch within the Italian Army. The Carabinieri badge is stencilled in black on his new M41 steel helmet, with reduced outline, Y-shaped chin straps, and a padded nose protector under the front rim. As well as the zip-front M41 jump overall he has padded gloves, padded grey canvas knee protectors, and rubber-soled jumpboots. His red-on-grey rank badge is worn on the upper left chest. The parachute is the new, reliable IF41 (Imbragatura di Fanteria, 'infantry harness').





Paratroopers in training recover the contents of a carrier used during the drop for weapons, ammunition and equipment. They wear M41 grey one-piece jumpsuits, with separate knee protectors – see Plate C3. (EG Vitetti)

mainly for their physical fitness – only began their course on 10 July, a month after Italy entered the war. Morale suffered from the inadequacy of the available parachutes; incremental improvements were made to the D39 and D40, but a truly satisfactory type did not enter production until March 1941 (the IF41, based on the German RZ16 model). Lack of equipment greatly affected the development of the Italian airborne force, and it was only on 25 February 1943 that a second school was created at Viterbo. The Tarquinia establishment was closed down on 10 July 1943.

Nevertheless, in July 1940 the first three *battaglioni paracadutisti* were created on paper, with the 3rd Bn originally raised entirely from

Carabinieri military police. In September 1940 the 1st and 3rd Bns swapped numbers, to maintain the tradition of the Carabinieri's precedence as the senior corps of the army, but the 1° Battaglione Carabinieri Paracadutisti was to remain an independent unit. In April 1941, following the creation of a fourth battalion, the 1° Reggimento Paracadutisti was formed with the 2nd–4th Bns; later the same year three further battalions (5th–7th, plus two regimental anti-tank companies) were established, to form the 2° Reggimento Paracadutisti, and the 8° Battaglione Guastatori Paracadutisti (Paratroop Assault Engineer Bn) was also raised.

Early in 1942 three more parachute battalions followed (9th–11th), while the AT companies were merged to form the first Gruppo Artiglieria



Paratroopers preparing for a training jump in 1941, all wearing the early grey version of the German-inspired three-quarter length jumpsuit over their grey-green uniforms. (Piero Crociani Collection)

Paracadutista (Paratroop Artillery Battalion). This was followed by a second and a third battalion, and all were brought together to form the *Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutista*.

DIVISIONI PARACADUTISTI

These were the last steps in the completion of the first Italian airborne division, whose official creation dated from 1 September 1941. The *Divisione Paracadutisti* – or *1^a Divisione Paracadutisti* – was later given the name *Folgore* ('Thunderbolt'); in addition to headquarters and service elements, its organization comprised:

1° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (2°, 3° & 4° Bns)
2° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (5°, 6° & 7° Bns)
3° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (9°, 10° & 11° Bns)
Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutista (1°, 2° & 3° Gruppi)
8° *Battaglione Guastatori Paracadutisti*
plus one sapper and one signals company, and later a mortar company.

While still in the process of formation, the division started training for a planned invasion of the island of Malta, from where British naval and air forces were ravaging the shipping lanes between Italy and North Africa. The airborne component of the assault was to be entrusted to the *Folgore* Division and the German Parachute Brigade *Ramcke*. In June 1942, however, Rommel's victory at Gazala and the seizure of the port of Tobruk practically put an end to the plan. The parachute infantry regiments then swapped numbers, the 1st becoming the 3rd, the 2nd becoming the 1st, and the 3rd becoming the 2nd Regiment.

This proved short-lived, since on 27 July 1942 a major reorganization was ordered. The division was renumbered as the 185^a *Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore*. The parachute infantry became the 186° (originally the 2°, most recently the 1°) and 187° (originally the 3°, most recently the 2°) *Reggimenti Paracadutisti*, each with three battalions, plus the 2° and 4° *Battaglioni* of the 185° *Reggimento* (originally the 1°, most recently the 3° *Reggimento*). The parachute artillery regiment was renumbered the 185°; the former 8° *Battaglione Guastatori Paracadutisti* also took the divisional number, as did the sapper and signals companies. Initially the mortar company was also numbered 185^a, but was replaced by the 20^a *Compagnia*.

The 3° *Battaglione* from 185° *Reggimento* provided the cadre for a new paratroop division, the 184^a *Divisione Paracadutisti Nembo* ('Cloud'), officially formed on 1 November 1942. This initially had two parachute infantry regiments and, from February 1943, three:

183° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (10°bis, 15° & 16° Bns)
184° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (12°, 13° & 14° Bns)
185° *Reggimento Paracadutisti* (3°, 8°bis & 11° Bns)
184° *Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutista* (3 bns)
184^a *Battaglione Guastatori Paracadutisti*
plus one sapper and one mortar company.



September 1941: a paratroop captain wearing the striking new collarless grey-green service uniform, with a chest design recalling the *Sahariana*, and baggy trousers tucked into and bloused over the jumpboots. Note also the paratroopers' new 'collar' insignia worn either side of the neck, the parachute qualification badge on his left upper sleeve, and the dagger. See Plate D1. (Piero Crociani Collection)



Folgore Division paratroopers in southern Italy, summer 1942. This camouflaged version of the jumpsmock was only in use for a short time, and was abandoned when the division was transferred to Egypt at the end of July. (EG Vitetti)

Although personnel were given parachute training, the Nembo Division was actually destined to be used in the infantry role, and a 184° Reparto Carristi (tank detachment) was later attached. Moved to Sardinia in June 1943, the 185° Reggimento Paracadutisti, operating independently, was then deployed to Sicily, and subsequently withdrawn to southern Italy. The division saw no action before the Italian surrender of September 1943, and thereafter elements joined either the German or the Allied forces.

At the same time another parachute division was being formed at Viterbo, intended to be numbered the 183° and named Ciclone ('Cyclone'). The only units actually formed were four parachute training battalions (numbered 17° to 20°), and one of artillery.

OPERATIONS

On 30 April 1941, the 2° Battaglione Paracadutisti carried out the only operational airdrop made by Italian airborne forces during the war when its 5^a Compagnia was dropped on the Greek island of Kefallinia (Cefalonia),



A guastatore paracadutista (paratroop assault engineer) of the 8th Guastatori Bn, Folgore Division. This particular version of the 'Samurai' vest was used to carry small demolition charges, fuses, and other necessary kit for this specialist role. (Piero Crociani Collection)

while Blackshirts units landed from the sea. The island was seized without a fight, since the Greek Army had already in large part surrendered.

The first Italian paratroop unit to see combat was the detached 1° Battaglione Carabinieri Paracadutisti, sent to North Africa in July 1941 and attached to the Corpo d'Armata di Manovra. During the retreat of that December it was deployed to protect the route of the Ariete Division; on 18–20 December, at Eluet el Asel in the Djebel Akhbar mountains, it fought rearguard actions against elements of the 4th Indian Division. The battalion suffered 25 killed in action and 251 missing before its remnants started to withdraw, and it was subsequently disbanded.

In July 1942, with the cancellation of the planned attack on Malta now imminent, and the Axis forces in North Africa facing a manpower crisis due to heavy losses, the Folgore Division – composed of physically fit, strongly motivated and well trained men – seemed to offer a suitable reinforcement. However, while its establishment was intended to be some 6,260 all ranks, its actual strength was lower. Beginning with the transport of the first batch of about 1,200 men to Egypt at the end of July, from August 1942 the division was never to exceed a true strength of about 5,000, with a reported 3,800 men in late October 1942. Moreover, being an airborne formation, its equipment was very limited. The 185° Reggimento Artiglieria Paracadutista had only 36x 47/32 AT guns (although in Egypt the artillery component was strengthened by attachments, from up to four different battalions). Motor transport was practically non-existent, with only enough vehicles available to carry three platoons at a time.

FOLGORE IN NORTH AFRICA, 1942–43

Deployed from late July 1942 just north of the Qattara Depression at the southern end of the Axis line, on a 15km (9 mile) front between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat, the division played a limited role during the battle of Alam Halfa, but its active night patrols and surprise attacks

against Allied positions quickly proved the worth of its training. From September 1942 the division was broken down into four tactical combat groups named after their commanders:

Raggruppamento Tattico Ruspoli (7° Battaglione Paracadutisti, 8°/185° Battaglione Guastatori, 2° Gruppo Artiglieria)

Raggruppamento Tattico Bechi (2° & 4° Battaglioni, 1° Gruppo Artiglieria)

Raggruppamento Tattico Camosso (9° & 10° Battaglioni, 3° Gruppo Artiglieria)

Raggruppamento Tattico Tantillo (5° & 6° Battaglioni).

However, the 10° Battaglione had to be disbanded because of losses, its remnants being absorbed into the 9° Battaglione, while the three airborne artillery battalions were reduced to two when the 2° Gruppo was disbanded. Consequently, by October 1942 only three tactical groups remained – Ruspoli, Camosso and Bechi.

Among notable engagements before the battle of Alamein were a New Zealand attack on 4 September that cost the Italian paratroopers some 200 men, but the New Zealanders the capture of one of their brigadiers; and subsequently an attack from British 131st Bde on 30 September, which ended with the loss of about 45 Italians and 400 British soldiers. This was the direct consequence of the tactics developed by the men of the Folgore Division; hidden in their foxholes – simple dugouts in the desert, lacking any kind of protection but very hard to see – they would let the enemy advance past their positions, only to launch a determined counter-attack immediately afterwards. The confusion generated by the sudden appearance of the paratroopers, throwing grenades and ‘Molotov cocktails’ against Allied tanks and firing at the infantry, proved more than enough to unbalance the attacking forces and cause heavy losses.

This tactic was also effective during the early stage of Montgomery’s Alamein offensive, Operation *Lightfoot*. The British 7th Armoured and 44th Infantry divisions attacked the positions of the Folgore Division first on 23/24 October, while the Free French Bde attacked the Nabq Rala position just north of Qattara. The British aim was to distract southwards the attention of the Axis southern mobile group made up of the Ariete and the German 21st Panzer divisions, by breaching the minefields and the Folgore’s defence position and reaching the Deir Alinda plateau. On paper this was a realistic objective, given the forces involved and the Italians’ lack of adequate anti-tank weapons. However, the Folgore had the most motivated and best trained men in the Italian Army; they took advantage of the slow British advance through the narrow passages opened in the minefields to use their swift counter-attack tactics to the fullest effect. On 25 October, the British 4th Armoured and 69th Infantry brigades attacked the Folgore positions at Deir el Munassib, held by the Raggruppamenti Ruspoli and Bechi. They penetrated the Italian outposts only to face a swift counter-attack and heavy artillery fire, and by the end of the day 4th Armd Bde had lost 22 tanks without breaking through the Italian defences. At this point the British attack was called off, and only minor clashes took place thereafter; Munassib was attacked again on 26 and 29 October, but the battle then shifted north, and the Folgore was no longer engaged. So far its losses were some 1,100 men.

On 2 November the division was given the order to withdraw. All heavy equipment was destroyed, and the Folgore – without motor transport – marched some 150km (93 miles) across the desert to the north. Following the British breakthrough on 4 November the paratroopers were surrounded



the next day at Fuka by the British 1st Armd Div, and only about 600 men succeeded in escaping the trap. Practically destroyed, the Folgore Division was disbanded on 25 November 1942. Its remnants subsequently formed the III/66° Reggimento of the Trieste Division; the arrival of replacements also allowed the formation of the 285° Battaglione Paracadutisti Folgore. These Italian paratroopers distinguished themselves once again in April 1943 during the battle of Takrouna against the New Zealand Division, before the final surrender on 13 May ended the Tunisian campaign.

47/32 anti-tank gun of the Folgore Division's 185th Parachute Artillery Regt, well concealed in a pit on the El Alamein front, 1942. The crew are mostly in shirtsleeve order, apart from the standing paratrooper. Note that the camouflage-cloth helmet cover was still in use. (EG Vitetti)

GUASTATORI

The outbreak of war found the Italian Army without units trained and equipped specifically for storming fortified enemy positions. During World War I this role was performed by the Arditi, but during the inter-war period no real attention was paid to developing such tactics, and it was assumed that the task would be carried out by infantry units. The Army's Corpo del Genio dealt almost exclusively with technical matters; its units included sapper, radio and wire communications (a company of each was assigned to each division), mining, bridging, railway engineering and other technical elements.

As in the case of the paratroopers, lessons drawn from the German campaign in the West in May–June 1940 only belatedly led the Italian Army to create its own assault engineers. At the end of July 1940 an engineer officer, Col Pietro Steiner, was given the task of raising this branch from scratch. Named the Genio Guastatori (which roughly translates as 'engineer demolishers'), it was thus an impromptu creation, rushed into existence over a very short period of time and without any first-hand experience upon which to draw. Colonel Steiner wasted no time at all, and on 1 August 1940 he founded the Scuola Guastatori del Genio at Civitavecchia, north of Rome. The school was fully active less than ten days later, following the arrival of the first batch of trainees, who initially had to live under canvas. By mid-September the school was already working at full capacity, with facilities for 1,000 men. The first training course started on 10 August and ended on 30 September, by which time four Guastatori companies had been formed (numbered 1st, 2nd, 7th & 8th). The second course started on 5 October 1940 and ended on 18 November, with the creation of five more companies (3rd–6th, and 9th Alpini – later, the 5th and 6th Companies swapped numbers).



1a



In November 1940, however, Col Steiner was transferred to Albania to fight in the war against Greece, and the engineer school at Civitavecchia practically ceased to exist; it was taken over by the infantry branch, which began to create its own assault troops (*Guastatori di Fanteria*). These were generally trained like the *Guastatori del Genio*, but without practising mine-laying and removal. The *Guastatori del Genio* established a small school of their own at Trieste in northern Italy; its sole task was to provide trained replacements for the *Guastatori* battalions that had already been formed.

ORGANIZATION AND TACTICS

The creation of the *Guastatori del Genio* brought the Italian Army two main innovations: firstly, in their organization and tactics, and secondly, in the selection and training of personnel.

A *Guastatori* company mustered 343 all ranks, in an HQ platoon (HQ squad with 23 men, plus 16 in the communications and logistics squad), and four *Guastatori* platoons (*plotoni*). Each platoon comprised two large 'squads' each with 36 *Guastatori*, a junior officer, a driver and an orderly. This *squadra Guastatori* was the main tactical unit, specifically tasked to assault and destroy enemy bunkers and other 'hard' defences; for this purpose it was divided into two 'groups', the destruction group (*gruppo distruttori*) and the support group (*gruppo d'appoggio*). The destruction group, with 12 *Guastatori*, included a four-man Bangalore-torpedo section and a four-man demolition charges section, plus two flamethrower operators in support. The support group, with six *Guastatori*, included a three-man light machine-gun section to provide fire support during the assault, and a three-man 45mm mortar group, also providing fire support and laying smoke screens to cover the attack.

D

PARATROOPERS, 1941–42

1: *Sottotenente, Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore; Italy, 1941*

Initially the paratroopers used standard Army M40 uniforms, but an order of 29 October 1941 introduced this striking new pattern, together with a helmet cover in khaki, green and brown camouflage cloth. The uniform was characterized by the collarless jacket without shoulder straps, with buttoned wrist bands, and with the chest cut similarly to the *Sahariana*. Simultaneously, the *Paracadutisti* were given new 'lapel' patches (1a – worn each side of the neck aperture), and a yellow parachute qualification brevet, worn on the left upper sleeve. This second lieutenant's rank insignia, also in yellow on grey-green, are worn on the forearms; on his left chest is the ribbon of the War Cross for Military Valour. The matching trousers were cut loose and baggy, closing at the ankles to tuck into jumpboots. Officers continued to use the standard 'Sam Browne'-style belt, supporting the holstered pistol and paratrooper's dagger.

2: *Paracadutista, Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore; Italy, 1942*

Between late 1941 and early 1942 different versions of a new, more practical three-quarter-length jumpsmock, clearly inspired by the German 'bone-sack', were introduced to replace the overall. It was made in either grey or camouflage material, to be worn for the jump with the skirts buttoned between the thighs into short 'legs'; here, during rehearsals

for the aborted invasion of Malta, it is worn over tropical uniform with brown jumpboots. In 1942 a new hemp-webbing ammunition belt was introduced with a double row of pockets for ammo and grenades, supported by braces over the shoulders (and sometimes worn with the buckle at the back); the pistol holster and dagger could be attached to it by D-rings. The newly-introduced 9mm sub-machine gun – Moschetto Automatico Beretta M38A – had a special carrying bag for airdrops, available in different versions with or without pouches for magazines and the cleaning kit.

3: *Paracadutista, 185ª Divisione Paracadutisti Folgore;*

Egypt, 1942

The division was hurriedly sent to North Africa in August 1942, shortly after a new tropical uniform of the special paratrooper cut had been introduced, but in the African summer many paratroopers enjoyed the more comfortable shorts and shirtsleeve order, when not actually stripped to the waist. Tropical pith helmets were distributed and became quite popular, even though the paratroopers seldom managed to add their own branch badge to the national cockade. The rubber soles of jumpboots melted in the desert heat, and were replaced with the standard brown leather hobnailed issue. This soldier has a pattern of the so-called 'Samurai' load-carrying vest that lacks the row of small grenade pouches around the bottom.

Flamethrower operators wearing the special protective suit – of two different materials – the steel helmet, and the gas mask worn simply for protection, without the filter attached; the left side view also shows the asbestos gloves. The flamethrower was an integral part of the Guastatori tactics for assaulting enemy pillboxes and other 'hard' defences. (Piero Crociani Collection, & private collection)



Tactics were devised around the available weapons and equipment. Each man of the Bangalore section back-packed in canvas bags three 1m (3.28ft) tubular charges that could be assembled into a 3m-long pole charge. Moving under cover of the support group's fire with the Breda M30 light machine gun and Brixia M35 light mortar, the Bangalore section were to blow a gap in the enemy barbed wire. They were closely followed by the four men each carrying one or more 3kg (6.6lb) demolition charges, contained in metal boxes with handles. This demolition section were to approach the enemy pillbox, supported by the flamethrowers to suppress the defenders' fire. On reaching the bunker the Guastatori placed their charges, if necessary assembling 3m-long rods to push them into position. If there was any need, the flamethrower operators then finished the job.

Although quite effective against enemy fortifications, the Guastatori assault companies were dramatically weak in firepower if they faced enemy



Guastatori training with the M35 flamethrower; here the operator is wearing neither helmet nor gas mask. The Model 1935, capable of ten intermittent bursts of benzene and light oil to a range of 18–20m (59–65ft), was subsequently replaced by the M40, with a range of only 15 metres. (EG Vitetti)

infantry or, at worst, armour. A company's crew-served weapons were limited to the eight LMGs and eight 45mm mortars which, although effective for providing basic fire support to the assault squads, were hardly adequate if the Guastatori had to fight their way in against serious opposition. Officers, NCOs, flamethrower operators, and the LMG and mortar teams carried only a handgun (usually the 9mm Beretta M34 pistol) for self-defence. Those in the HQ squad and the Bangalore and demolition sections, and the ammunition carriers for the Bredas and mortars, were armed with the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano M91 carbine with its folding integral bayonet. Every Guastatore also carried as many hand grenades and smoke candles as possible, the former (mainly the light OTO M35, known as 'red devils' from their painted colour), having too weak a charge and fragmentation to be really effective.



A Guastatori sergeant in North Africa demonstrates for the photographer how hand grenades should be thrown. The fearless and instinctive handling of grenades was given special emphasis at the assault engineer training school set up by Col Steiner at Civitavecchia in August 1940. (ACS)

A 6.5mm Breda M30 light machine-gun team of the Guastatori in the desert; the Italian Army classed this weapon as a *fucile mitragliatore* ('automatic rifle'). In the foreground, the gunner carries the cleaning-kit pouch on his belt; in the background, one of the other two team members has an ammunition box, and, slung on his back, the case for exchange barrels, spare parts and accessories. One of the peculiarities of the M30 that slowed down its rate of fire was that its side-mounted magazine was permanently attached to the right of the receiver, and had to be unlatched and rotated forwards to be refilled from a 20-round charger. (Piero Crociani Collection)



SELECTION AND TRAINING

The Guastatori were selected from volunteers. Apparently, some 15,000 offered themselves during summer 1940, which suggests a certain degree of interest in the new speciality, but only 20 per cent of these actually completed the training course at Civitavecchia. After a strict medical examination, determining both physical and mental fitness, the would-be Guastatore underwent a short but extremely demanding and selective training course. Specifically developed by Col Steiner, this was based on the belief that, even though physical and mental toughness were a basic requirement for the Guastatori, in combat good training is as essential as courage. Steiner was a real innovator within the otherwise conservative Italian Army, which relied heavily on the inculcation of simple *élan*.

E ASSAULT ENGINEERS, EGYPT, 1942 **1: Maggiore Paolo Caccia Dominioni**

Major Dominioni, commander of XXXI Battaglione Guastatori, wears an Alpini hat – uncommon in the North African theatre – with its characteristic feather, and the silver branch badge of the Guastatori Alpini (eagle, over buglehorn, over crossed axes). This is also displayed, with the gold star and inner edging of this rank, on his black pre-1940 shoulder boards, which are piped in crimson for the Engineer branch. On the collar of his *Sahariana* is the silver national star, and on the left sleeve the Guastatori qualification badge, introduced in December 1941 (**1a** – a *gladius* sword set against a flaming petard). On his belt he carries a special forces dagger, and an old black holster for a Glisenti revolver of World War I vintage. The shorts appear to be a captured British khaki drill pair.

2: Tenente, XXXI Battaglione Guastatori

This veteran first lieutenant of Maj Dominioni's unit, about to fire an M1900 signal pistol, wears a *Sahariana* bleached almost white by the sun and laundering, with an M33 steel helmet, a

tropical khaki shirt and shorts. He too sports pre-1940 shoulder boards, with the Guastatori branch badge (gold grenade, flame billowing to right, over crossed axes). The badge **1a** is worn on his left sleeve. On his left chest are a double row of ribbons: the War Cross for Military Valour, Order of the Crown of Italy, and Seniority Cross; a Long Command award, War Cross, and War Volunteer Medal.

3: Caporalmaggiore of a mortar section, XXXI Battaglione Guastatori

The *camiciotto Sahariano* bore the rank badges – red thick-over-thin chevrons, on grey-green – on both sleeves, below the Guastatori badge on the left sleeve; the collar insignia for this branch was a black single 'flame' edged red, with the white national star. As a weapon crewman he would have a holstered pistol as well as the dagger on his belt. The 45mm Brixia M35 mortar, issued to the assault engineer squad's *gruppo d'appoggio*, was easy to fold up for man-packing, as here. Its ammo case was marked in white 'CASSETTA/PORTABOMBE/per MORTAIO FANTERIA'.





A Guastatori lieutenant – wearing the same grey-green tunic as his men – watches a 45mm Brixia M35 mortar team during field exercises in Italy; the mortar has been hastily dug into a shallow scrape. One of the two types of crew-served support weapons issued at infantry company or platoon level, the mortar had a high rate of fire (up to 25–30 rounds per minute), and the stability of its frame mounting enhanced its accuracy. However, these advantages were offset by the small size of its bombs, which at only 453g (1lb) weight were fairly ineffective. (Piero Crociani Collection)

The training course started with basic gymnastics, followed by firearms practice; this included rifle-firing from every position, grenade-throwing, defence against enemy hand grenades (two rows of Guastatori would throw each other hand grenades at close range), close combat techniques, and – for selected teams – firing practice with the M30 LMG and M35 mortar. This aimed to instil a close familiarity with weapons and equipment, making every movement and reaction so familiar as to be almost automatic. In the case of grenade training, the expectation was that a Guastatore would react to the attacking enemy by throwing his own grenade, almost simultaneously – a very effective practice against anyone who had never experienced it before.

The most demanding part of the course was special training with explosives. Having personally checked the actual range and effects of the various charges, Steiner reduced to a minimum the safety distances during the sessions of assault training with live explosives. Overall training also included a wide variety of basic skills, such as orientation and remote guidance toward targets at night and in limited visibility (the use of smoke), wire-cutting under enemy fire, mine-laying, and mine detection and lifting using both improvised equipment and electro-magnetic mine detectors. The training course ended with an exercise with live explosives, during which the squad staged an assault against an enemy bunker.

OPERATIONS: NORTH AFRICA

On 14 January 1941 the 3rd and 4th Guastatori companies were sent to North Africa, forming the provisional Battaglione Guastatori di Formazione, under command of the 1° Raggruppamento Speciale Genio. Being practically without tasks until Rommel's drive into Cyrenaica in April 1941, they were employed at first in constructing field fortifications. On 27 April both companies were deployed around the Tobruk fortress, detached to the Ariete and Brescia divisions, and taking part with them in the attacks on the Ras el Medauar positions on 30 April–4 May. These resulted in heavy losses; the companies had a total of 95 killed, wounded and missing, without achieving a breakthrough, but their outstanding performance earned them Rommel's praise. Thereafter the two companies were sent to rest and reorganize; despite the arrival of some 50 replacements from Italy, each eventually reduced the number of its platoons from four to two. On 15 August 1941 the two understrength companies formed the XXXII Battaglione Guastatori which, later that same month, was deployed to face Tobruk once again under command of XXI Corpo d'Armata.

Meanwhile, after a baptism of fire in the early stages of the invasion of Yugoslavia, on 18 April 1941 the 1st, 2nd, 7th and 8th companies were brought together to form the XXXI Battaglione Guastatori, some 1,300 strong.

After a period of training in the Turin area in August, in mid-September 1941 it too was sent to North Africa and deployed under XXI Corpo d'Armata in the Tobruk area. The 5th, 6th and 9th (Alpini) companies were in Albania by 15 March 1941, and were committed to the Greek campaign, forming the XXX Battaglione Guastatori. After taking part in the attack on southern Yugoslavia in April it was brought back to Italy for re-training.

On 18 November 1941, when the British *Crusader* offensive began with the aim of raising the siege of Tobruk, the XXXI and XXXII Battaglioni Guastatori became involved in a kind of warfare for which they were neither trained nor equipped. The XXXI Battaglione, deployed with the Pavia and Bologna divisions at Tobruk, fought first at Belhamed and then at Bu Hamud, using its explosives against British tanks. Ordered to withdraw to Gazala on 7 December, the battalion (lacking motor transport) was attacked and almost wiped out by a British armoured car column on 19 December, when the unit suffered some 200 casualties. An accidental explosion cost another 16 killed and 22 wounded, and by January 1942 the XXXI Battaglione had lost a total of 362 men. Sent to Tripoli to reorganize, the battalion was reduced to three companies by merging the remnant of 2nd Company into the 1st Company. The XXXII Battaglione, also deployed at Tobruk, suffered fewer losses – about 17 per cent of its strength. This enabled it to be one of the leading Italian units to take part in Rommel's second drive into Cyrenaica in January–February 1942; nevertheless, in May 1942 the battalion was down to a strength of 263 all ranks.

On 17 March 1942 the XXX Battaglione Guastatori detached its new 6th (ex-5th) Company to the La Spezia Infantry Division, which was intended to take part in the assault on Malta; with only the new 5th (ex-6th) Company and the 9th Alpini Company, it was then attached to the Corpo d'Armata Alpino. At the end of July 1942 this formation was sent to the Eastern Front, and eventually deployed late in September on the lower River Don.

In May 1942, following Rommel's attacks against the Gazala Line and the advance to Tobruk, both the XXXI and XXXII Battaglioni Guastatori were brought back into the front line. On 20 June both units (the XXXI Guastatori only some 260 strong) attacked the Tobruk defences along with



Major Paolo Caccia Dominioni – in Alpini hat (see Plate E1) – with officers of his 31st Assault Engineer Battalion in Egypt, 1942. The group displays a wide variety of uniform items; Maj Dominioni seems to wear a captured British khaki drill bush jacket and 'Bombay bloomers'. (Piero Crociani Collection)

A Guastatori mortar team in the Western Desert, showing how the weapon was actually intended to be served in the field, with the crew in the prone position. (ACS)



the Trento, Ariete and Trieste divisions. This time they broke through the defence line, and subsequently – now fully motorized, thanks to the many captured Allied vehicles – they advanced to the ‘Alamein line’. On 3 July 1942, now down to about 120 men, the XXXII Battaglione took part in the first attempt on these positions, only to face heavy artillery fire and a determined British reaction. Remnants of the battalion were deployed along with the 7° Reggimento Bersaglieri when, on 16–17 July, their positions were attacked by Australian forces that practically wiped out the Italian units. On 16 August 1942 the XXXII Battaglione Guastatori was officially disbanded, the 72 remaining men (mostly from HQ platoons) being absorbed into the XXXI Battaglione.

The XXXI Battaglione, commanded since late June 1942 by Maj Paolo Caccia Dominioni, had been kept in reserve and was only deployed in the front line in late August, when (along with elements of the Bologna and



Guastatori laying mines on the El Alamein defence line; this was their main task in September–October 1942, before Gen Montgomery unleashed his offensive. The officer wears shoulder boards on his *Sahariana* jacket. (Piero Crociani Collection)

Trento divisions) it took part in a raid against the British defences. Subsequently, it was employed for mine-laying. Pulled back to the rear lines at the end of August 1942, the battalion was now 317 strong. It was attached to the Folgore Division in September, and by mid-October its strength had been raised to 610 thanks to an intake of replacements from Italy. Until the start of the 'second' battle of Alamein the battalion was mainly engaged in mine-laying and constructing field fortifications.

Between 23 and 29 October the XXXI Battaglione faced, along with the Folgore paratroopers, the southern prong of the British offensive, which cost it about 100 men. On 2 November it began to withdraw, with about one-third of its 500 men carried on lorries. During the withdrawal the battalion was attacked by armoured cars, losing about 30 per cent of its men. The remnants of XXXI Battaglione – some 320 all ranks – reached Tobruk on 8 November, and withdrew to Tripoli by the end of that month, when Maj Dominioni left the command. The XXXI Battaglione was reorganized in January 1943, now with only the 1st and 7th companies, and was attached to the La Spezia Division. This, with its 5^a Compagnia Guastatori, had been shipped to Tunisia in December 1942; the assault engineer company was to lose some 72 men out of an original strength of 118 during the Tunisian campaign. Both the La Spezia Division and the XXXI Battaglione fought at first on the Mareth Line, then at Wadi Akarit, before the eventual surrender of the Italian First Army and the German forces on 13 May 1943.

THE EASTERN FRONT

As mentioned, the XXX Battaglione Guastatori, part of the Italian 8^a Armata (ARMIR, Armata Italiana in Russia) was deployed on the lower River Don late in September 1942. During the Soviet winter counter-offensives north and south of Stalingrad, this was to be one of the many Italian units to be surrounded and destroyed north-west of the city. On 13 January 1943 the Red Army's Voronezh and South-West Fronts launched Operation *Little Saturn* against the positions held by the ARMIR; the following day the XXX Battaglione was deployed along with other units (including the Monte Cervino Alpini battalion – see below) in defence of the HQ of the Corpo d'Armata Alpino at Rossosh. On 15 January a Soviet tank column attacked the army corps HQ, and the XXX Battaglione lost some 160 men before withdrawing westwards with the rest of the corps. On 27 January its men were part of a column that attacked and seized Nikolayevka, thus opening the road for the withdrawal west, but at a high price. The following day, when the column made contact with German forces, there were just 121 men left out of the 480 Guastatori who had been on the battalion strength on 1 January.

The battalion was subsequently disbanded, and by June 1943 the Italian Army had only three Guastatori companies left: the 30^a Alpini, formed in August 1942 (later to be part of the rebuilt XXXI Guastatori), and the 10^a and 11^a Compagnie. Formed in May–June 1943 and never rising above the level of understrength training units, both these companies were disbanded in August 1943. On 1 August a new XXXI Battaglione Guastatori Alpini was formed under the command of Paolo Caccia Dominioni; it had a paper strength of about 1,000, but actually only a single company, the remainder being recruits who were still undergoing their training at the time of the Italian surrender on 8 September 1943.

BATTAGLIONE SCIATORI MONTE CERVINO

ALBANIA

Just a fortnight after the Italian attacks on Greece from Albania opened on 28 October 1940, things took a turn for the worse, and drastic measures were needed. These included the development of a ski unit able to move and fight in snow-covered terrain. With unusual rapidity, on 18 December 1940 the Battaglione Sciatori Monte Cervino (Mount Cervino Ski Battalion) was formed with personnel from the Scuola Militare Alpina (Military Mountain Training School) at Aosta in north-west Italy, and men from the 4° Reggimento Alpini, all recruited in the mountainous Piedmont region. The battalion comprised an HQ platoon and two Alpini companies, each with three platoons, and had a total strength of 320 all ranks. This was significantly smaller than that of an average Alpini battalion, but the deficiency was to some extent offset by better equipment – even though the hastily raised unit did not receive enough to equip every man before it was sent to Albania to fight against the Greeks.

Every Alpino of the battalion was supposed to have late-model skis, two pairs of rubber-soled boots (a feature shared only with the paratroopers), a windbreaker jacket, a fur-lined coat, and a white camouflage over-suit for use in snow-covered terrain. This latter had a hooded anorak, long trousers to tuck into the boots, and long woollen socks in place of the puttees usually worn by the other Alpini. A white helmet cover, haversack and ammunition-pouch belt were also included; however, there were not enough of these to

A ski patrol of the Monte Cervino Bn on the Albanian-Greek front, 1941; although the white camouflage suit is worn, they are not yet equipped with the white webbing equipment, and still wear black or grey-green belts and pouches. (ACS)



equip the entire battalion. Weapons were common to other units: the 6.5mm M91 carbine, 9mm Beretta M34 pistol, and a total of 12 Breda 6.5mm M30 light machine guns. There were no heavier weapons, and no motor transport at all, but rather the mules that the Alpini customarily used to carry all kinds of equipment and supplies on mountain tracks.

On 13 January 1941, with the situation at the front worsening day by day, the battalion left Aosta, arriving in Albania on the 18th of that month. It was immediately deployed to fill a gap in the Italian line on the Mali Trebeshines massif – where it soon discovered that this mountainous area was covered with a type of snow not suitable for skiing, since snowfalls soon gave way to thick mud. Coupled with chilling cold, and the lack of supplies due to the difficult road conditions on the 4,500-foot massif, this made mere survival difficult enough. On 23 and 24 January the two companies, fighting separately, suffered 14 killed, 37 wounded and 21 missing in action, plus other casualties due to frostbite and sickness. By 26 February the small battalion was down to three officers and 46 other ranks, with a large number of the Alpini hospitalized, and it was pulled out of the line to rest and refit.

On 5 March 1941 the remnants of the Monte Cervino Bn were back in the front line, this time on the Mali Scindeli massif, where they remained until 10 April. By then reduced to the strength of a single platoon, the remnants returned to Italy in May 1941 after German intervention brought the war against Greece to a successful end. The unit's losses amounted to 14 officers killed or wounded out of 19 (including 8 replacements), 8 NCOs killed or wounded out of 13, and 153 Alpini killed or wounded out of 208. The flag of the battalion was decorated with the Silver Medal for Valour, and 37 of its members received individual awards; however, the unit was disbanded on 24 May 1941.

The battalion's overall performance had been unimpressive, but this was under conditions very different from those it had been (to some extent) prepared to face. The original concept behind its creation was a unit to perform small actions – raids deep behind enemy lines by fast-moving Alpini skiers. Instead it had been thrown into footslogging infantry warfare, largely dominated by the defence of positions in rugged mountain terrain. The difficult weather and failure of the supply lines had meant long periods without hot meals, and no possibility of changing wet clothes, thus contributing to the high sickness rate.

THE EASTERN FRONT

Just one month after the disbandment of the unit, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and since an Italian army corps was quickly sent to the Eastern Front the need for a ski unit, for possible use on the Russian steppes, was discussed once more.

In October 1941 the Monte Cervino Bn was re-formed, again with only two rifle companies. This time personnel were taken from every Alpini unit, about one-third of them volunteers; this mixed composition was made necessary by the simple fact that not many mountaineers actually had skiing skills. Special equipment was now made available for every member of the battalion, and



Two Alpini of the Monte Cervino Bn during a pause at the Brenner Pass on the German-Italian border while on their way to the Eastern Front, January 1942. They wear grey-green turtleneck sweaters under their uniform jackets, and the special white webbing belt and ammunition pouches. The fact that the members of this battalion were also given a dagger, like the Arditi, was a kind of official acknowledgement of their status as a special forces unit. (Piero Crociani Collection)

A patrolling soldier of the Monte Cervino Bn in full white clothing, including a knitted Balaclava under his helmet; he retains the black feather of the Alpini, attached by a pompon to his helmet cover. The Balaclava was sometimes seen worn in the field without the steel helmet. (Piero Crociani Collection)



additional items of special clothing were provided: white capes, to camouflage men lying on the snow; sleeveless sheepskin jerkins; gauntlets with waterproof covers and fur-lined gloves; and knee-high overboots lined with lambskin. There was also a limited improvement in the weapons scales, with the issue of some 9mm Beretta M38A sub-machine guns to officers and NCOs, and the addition of a heavy machine-gun squad to one of the companies.

The battalion's journey to the Russian Front in southern Ukraine lasted more than a month, from 13 January to 18 February 1942. The unit was



A ski-mounted stretcher sled, part of the battalion's special equipment. The two Alpini behind it (probably medics) are wearing black leather belts. (Private collection)

promptly deployed in the area of Dnepropetrovsk on the lower River Dnieper, fighting at first against partisans during ski patrols and fast raids. It was soon moved up to the front line, in the sector of the Pasubio Division under XXXV Corpo d'Armata. On 24 March 1942 the battalion had its first real clash with Red Army troops, at Olovatka. A tactical mistake sent 1st Company across open ground between two Soviet positions; as if the resulting crossfire was not bad enough, at a temperature of minus 32°C the complicated feed system of the Breda M30 LMGs jammed, and no fire support at all was forthcoming. Eventually the 2nd Company rescued the 1st; overall losses were six killed and about 20 wounded, plus some 30 cases



Sleeveless sheepskin jerkins were used by soldiers of the Italian Eighth Army on the Eastern Front, including those of the ski battalion. These Alpini skiers carry the Mannlicher-Carcano M91 carbine slung. (Piero Crociani Collection)

of frostbite. This setback revealed the need for increased firepower, leading to the attachment to the battalion of a heavy weapons (*armi d'accompagnamento*) company. This had two 81mm mortar platoons (each with four tubes); two AT platoons (each with two 47/32 AT guns); and two machine-gun platoons, plus ten heavy lorries for motor transport. This 8th Company joined the battalion at the end of April 1942, thus bringing its total strength up to about 400 all ranks.

In May the Monte Cervino Bn was back in the front line; on 18 May, during the battle for Izyum, it seized the village of Klivonoi at a cost of 15 killed and 40 wounded. Pulled out of the line into quarantine due to an outbreak of infectious fever, the battalion was back at the front on 19 June. Between 20 and 25 August 1942 it took part in the first defensive fighting on the River Don, pushing back Red Army assaults against its forward positions, and eventually counter-attacking to retake a position lost by a Bersaglieri unit.

Early in October 1942 the Monte Cervino Bn was attached to the HQ of the Corpo d'Armata Alpino, which employed it as a reserve close to the HQ at Rossosh. Following the start of the Soviet counter-offensive, on 14 December the Monte Cervino Bn was again used to fill a gap in the line, in the village of Ivanovka. Under massive Red Army pressure the remnants of the unit withdrew on their skis. They were then deployed to defend a road junction at Seleni Yar, along with the Alpini Battaglione L'Aquila; once more Soviet attacks threatened encirclement and annihilation, but the battalion was eventually rescued by German SP guns. Lacking the 8th Heavy Weapons Co (which had retreated separately, but rejoined the battalion on 31 December), the survivors of the two rifle companies, including many suffering from frostbite, reached Rossosh on 30 December. Here the Monte Cervino and XXX Guastatori battalions were to defend the HQ of the Alpine Corps. Units started to fall back after Soviet tank attacks on 14–15 January 1943, with the Monte Cervino Bn acting as rearguard. The last to withdraw westwards, the battalion split up; some Alpini were carried on lorries, others on sleds, but the majority – about

120 men – marched on foot after abandoning their skis. The first two groups, mainly the wounded and the Heavy Weapons Co, managed to escape encirclement, but the rest of the battalion struggled against attacks by both Soviet armour and partisans, and finally were either killed or captured.

Out of the 564 men of the Monte Cervino Battalion, including replacements, 114 were killed in action and 226 were listed missing; only 15 men were ever to return from the Soviet POW camps. Before the unit was disbanded its flag was decorated with a Gold Medal for Valour, as were two of its members, along with 35 Silver and 54 Bronze Medals for Valour, plus 65 War Merit Crosses, and some German Iron Crosses awarded in the field. In 1943 another battalion was given the name Monte Cervino; this was to serve with the XX Raggruppamento Sciatori (Ski Group), deployed to southern France until September 1943.

Two officers of the 10th Arditi Regiment at Santa Severa, 1942 – see Plate F3. At right, the lieutenant displays a cap-style two-star rank badge above his left shirt pocket; he also wears a grey-green cummerbund and necktie, as per pre-war regulations. (Andrea Molinari Collection)

SPECIAL FORCES:

X REGGIMENTO ARDITI

The Italian Army lacked experience in the field of true special-service forces; even the Arditi of the Great War had been essentially shock-assault units, rather than being remotely comparable to, for example, the British Commandos, Long Range Desert Group or Special Air Service. It was the example provided by these British units in the Mediterranean and the Western Desert that prompted the Italians to consider the development of

a similar special force, but the process of study and evaluation took some time. It was not until April 1942 that it was decided to form a new Arditi battalion, which revived the name and the traditions of the World War I assault units but had nothing else in common with them. The basic mission of the new unit was envisaged as striking valuable targets behind Allied lines – railways, roads, bridges, airfields, petrol and ammunition dumps – mainly with the purpose of compelling the Allies to commit forces to their defence.

ORGANIZATION

The first battalion was formed in May 1942 with volunteers selected from all over the Army; the selectors looked not only for physical and mental toughness, but also for actual battle experience, with a bias towards men who had received combat decorations. The first batch of volunteers was based in the seaside village of Santa Severa, near Rome; this was chosen because it was close to the parachute and assault engineer schools, and because wooded,





The AS42 patrol vehicle, as used by the Camionettisti companies of 10th Arditi. Its armoured-car chassis gave it a weight of about 4 tons; it had a rear-mounted 6-litre engine and 4-wheel drive, and, with 24 fuel and water cans in its deep side-racks and other stowage positions, a range of up to 1,100km (683 miles). In the event, the Camionetta Sahariana never saw action in its intended deep-penetration role in the Western Desert. This example was photographed near Enfidaville in Tunisia, where the regiment's 103^a Compagnia fought to the last in March–May 1943. (USSME)

sparsely inhabited hill terrain nearby was suitable for training exercises. Three companies were formed: the 101^a Arditi Paracadutisti (paratroopers), 102^a Arditi Nuotatori (swimmers), and 103^a Arditi Camionettisti ('jeep'-mounted). On 20 July 1942 a second battalion was formed, again with three companies having the same specialisations (111^a, 112^a, and the 113^a – later renamed 120^a). On 15 September 1942 the two small battalions formed the X Reggimento Arditi, directly at the disposal of the Army General Staff.

On 1 March 1943 a III Battaglione would be formed, now with four companies: 121^a and 131^a Arditi Paracadutisti, 122^a and 123^a Arditi Camionettisti. This was to mark a definitive switch to the paratroop and patrol-truck roles only. This was further emphasized following the creation of the IV Battaglione in May 1943; it was intended that this should regroup all the parachute companies from the other three battalions, but eventually it comprised the rebuilt 102^a Compagnia, plus newly formed 104^a and 110^a Compagnie.

With a strength in October 1942 of 87 officers, 150 NCOs and 493 other ranks, the X Reggimento included an HQ company with the staff, a Carabinieri military police group (employed in maintaining secrecy and security), and a logistics platoon. As mentioned, the I and II Battaglioni each had a parachute company, for sabotage missions behind Allied lines; a swimmer company, for missions against targets close to the coast; and a light motorized company, modelled on the British LRDG/ SAS and intended for deep-penetration missions in the Western Desert. Regardless of its speciality, each company was broken down into small patrols, each of two officers and 18 other ranks.

TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT

First-stage training was the same for all; the intensive basic course included gymnastics, forced marches, speed marches carrying full equipment, boxing, wrestling, and close combat with hands and knife. Specific training followed, including field orientation, use of compass and maps, familiarity with



individual and heavy weapons, and use of explosives. Practical field exercises included, for the paratroopers, day and at least three night jumps (in varying conditions of visibility) carrying full equipment. The swimmers were trained in all conditions of sea state, day and night. They learned to operate rubber boats, and to make clandestine landings on enemy-held coastlines. Specific training was to include embarking on and disembarking from submarines, and one of the swimmer companies was specifically trained and qualified to exit from the torpedo tubes of submerged submarines, carrying with them waterproof bags holding their weapons and equipment, plus rubber boats that were to be inflated using small compressed-air bottles. The *Camionettisti* were thoroughly trained in the use and maintenance of their vehicles, and in advanced navigation by day and night.

However, training in the special company roles was to be hampered by the all too familiar lack of co-ordination between branches of the Italian armed forces, as well as by the diminished resources available by mid-1942. The Arditi paratroopers lacked the services of experienced instructors, aircrews and jumpmasters. One experienced officer and an aerial observer were attached to the regimental HQ, but the demanding skill of accurately locating drop zones was never mastered. Likewise, while the Arditi swimmers were supposed to be taken close inshore by submarine, and practised in harbour the exit and boat-handling skills described above, there were no submarines available to give them actual sea training.

The unit's weapons included the Beretta M38A sub-machine gun (with a special 40-round magazine), alongside the Mannlicher-Carcano M91 carbine; every Ardito also had a Beretta M34 pistol and six hand grenades. Each 20-man patrol had support weapons – the Breda M30 LMG and Brixia M35 light mortar, and in some cases flamethrowers. For their sabotage missions every Ardito was trained to use cylindrical or rectangular TNT charges in 150g, 200g and 500g sizes; also available were a cylindrical 100g gelatine charge, 500g explosive bags, and 400g, 35cm 'sausages' of T4 plastic explosive. The Arditi were also intended to use portable anti-tank mines,

F ASSAULT ENGINEERS, SKI BATTALION & ARDITI

1: *Flammieri*, *Guastatori*; Trieste, Italy, 1941

Two flamethrowers were integral to the assault engineer squad's *gruppo distruttori*. The special suit for their operators ('*flammieri*') was introduced before World War II; made of asbestos-treated canvas, it comprised a hood; a large jacket with concealed buttons and cuff-straps to secure the asbestos-impregnated gloves; and long trousers. It was intended for use together with the steel helmet, and the M35 gas mask without filter (though this was often discarded, particularly in North Africa). The flamethrower is an M35, with its distinctive bulky ignition nozzle at the end of the wand.

2: *Alpino light machine gunner*, *Battaglione Sciatori Monte Cervino*; Ukraine, 1942

The snow-camouflage suit was particular to this battalion, though its use was never officially sanctioned. Similar in cut to the grey windbreaker jacket, it was worn over the uniform, often under a sleeveless sheepskin jerkin. The four-pouch webbing equipment – issued white, but here dirtied with long use – was also special to this unit. The white knitted Balaclava cap was often worn under the steel helmet. This Alpino carries

the 6.5mm Breda M30, the standard Italian squad automatic weapon. Among its peculiarities was an oil pump to lubricate the cartridges before they were chambered, in order to aid extraction. In North Africa this naturally led to fouling with dust and consequent jamming, and in the depths of the Russian winter the oil might freeze – as in the engagement at Olovatka on 24 March 1942.

3: *Tenente*, *X Reggimento Arditi*; Italy, 1943

The unit's grey-green beret displays an embroidered regimental badge (gold 'X' on black disc within wreath, obscuring grenade with flames billowing left, against crossed *gladius* swords), and the two gold stars of this rank. The uniform worn by the X Arditi – here in tropical khaki – was identical to that of the paratroopers apart from insignia. Officer's rank badges are worn on the cuffs. The 'lapel' badges were azure-blue double 'flames' bearing the national star, and the Ardito qualification badge (**3a**) was worn on the left sleeve. The belt supports a dagger and a holstered pistol. This first lieutenant is using an M42 field telephone.



Six AS42s, probably in Tunisia; eight of these vehicles were shipped across from Italy for the 103^a Compagnia from I Bn, X Arditi in January 1943. In this case they mount the 20mm Breda M35 cannon, although this was often replaced with a less bulky 20mm Solothurn AT rifle. Each of the company's three patrols had an establishment of 20 all ranks; although the Camionetta Sahariana was designed to carry more, its combat crew seldom exceeded four men at most, leaving space for more ammunition, water and kit. (Piero Crociani Collection)

two versions of which were available – one to throw, and the other to stick to the armour with a vacuum cup.²

The paratroopers carried their M38 SMGs in a canvas bag tied at hip and shin, and also strapped to a security cord. A small bag used to carry 12kg of T4 explosive was attached to the chest and, if necessary, could be released on a 12m rope; it had a small parachute attached to ensure the same descent rate as the paratrooper. Other special items included luminous wrist watches, luminous wrist compasses (a rarity for the Italian military at that time), binoculars, signal lights and smoke candles. The swimmers had a special rubber swimming suit comprising a sleeveless vest, trousers, and a belly band used to carry the equipment (although the latter was not available before the end of 1942). The larger and more common type of inflatable rubber boat could accommodate five swimmers and was propelled by paddles; from late 1942/early 1943 a silenced motor was also provided, for emergency use only.

The Camionettisti had a special vehicle of their own, the Camionetta Sahariana ('Sahara light truck') SPA-Viberti AS42, built on the same substantial chassis as the AB40-41 armoured car. This robust cross-country vehicle could mount an anti-tank gun, but the heaviest armament usually carried was a 20mm Breda M35 cannon and an 8mm Breda M37 heavy machine gun. Each Compagnia Camionettisti was to be equipped with 24 Camionette, plus eight lorries and two cars for services and supplies. However, although production began in August 1942, the delivery of the first batch of patrol trucks, for 103^a Compagnia of I Bn, was hampered by the destruction of a large number of them in an air raid on the Turin factory.

OPERATIONS: NORTH AFRICA

In fact the 103^a Compagnia, the first of its speciality to see combat, could not be deployed to North Africa before January 1943, when the personnel were flown to Tunisia and only eight Camionette were shipped across. The company arrived shortly before the fall of Tripoli; unable to operate as a

² For illustrated details of the use of military explosives and associated equipment, see Elite 160, *World War II Infantry Assault Tactics*, and for AT weapons, Elite 124, *World War II Infantry Anti-Tank Tactics*.

deep-penetration unit because of the unsuitable terrain and the configuration of the front lines, the company was split up and its three patrols were used separately for reconnaissance and assault missions. The first was attached from February 1943 to the Trieste Division fighting on the Mareth Line, and the others were allocated as corps assets. (This was the baptism of fire for the X Arditi, since in January 1943 a mission by two paratroop and two swimmer patrols, intended to attack an airfield on Cyprus, had been cancelled.) The actual battlefield experience of the 103^a Compagnia was significantly different from the missions for which it had been trained. All three patrols suffered heavy losses, which included the company commander. Regrouped in March, the 103^a Compagnia fought on the Wadi Akarit and Enfidaville lines until April 1943. By the final surrender in May its total losses amounted to nine killed and 18 wounded in action.

The sabotage missions actually carried out by X Arditi were, in many cases, failures due to lack of experience. The first was carried out on the night of 15/16 January 1943; a paratrooper patrol of two officers, two NCOs and seven Arditi was airdropped in Algeria to destroy a bridge on the River Eddous. The group reached the target only at dawn, had to fight against the sentries, but eventually succeeded in blowing the bridge up. The exfiltration plan required the patrol to reach the Axis lines by marching some 800km (500 miles). The following day the Arditi were surrounded by a company of French colonial troops, and subsequently surrendered.

Eight more missions followed, not counting those that were aborted due to the aircraft or submarine being unable to locate the drop or landing zone, either through lack of experience or because of the weather. On the night of 6/7 February 1943 a ten-man swimmer patrol landed in Algeria from a submarine with the aim of destroying a railway bridge. Delay caused by the patrol being landed in the wrong place prevented the Arditi reaching their target under cover of darkness; the mission was aborted, the submarine did not show up to retrieve them, and the patrol was captured. Lack of experience and expertise in the field of sabotage and special-forces operations thwarted most of the early Arditi missions during the first months of 1943, which were almost entirely aimed at targets in Algeria. Parachute missions on 15/16 February, 10/11 April and 12/13 April all failed, two without ever reaching their targets, and the survivors were all captured.

Few lessons seem to have been learned during a two-month pause following these failures. On the night of 12/13 June 1943 a large sabotage operation by Army and Air Force patrols was launched with the aim of destroying as many Allied aircraft as possible on North African airfields. None of the three Army Arditi patrols was successful. One, targeted on Benghazi airfield, landed far away from the planned drop zone, losing in the process their radio and water canisters. Another, dropped in Algeria to attack Oulméne airfield, landed safely and reached its target, only to find that it was no longer in use. The third patrol failed to reach Oran airfield. All three patrols were captured, without achieving any result.

SICILY

It was then belatedly acknowledged that lack of experience, in particular in locating drop zones, was a major obstacle to any further missions in Allied-held territory. This, and the imminent Allied threat to Italian territory, led to a reconsideration of the whole question of sabotage.



Two 10th Arditi officers talking with a senior Army officer in Tunisia, 1943. The officer in the centre would become the commanding general of the Carabinieri after the war. (Piero Crociani Collection)

On 19 May 1943 three more 'special companies' were ordered to be formed; these were to be deployed in Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, with the aim of carrying out sabotage missions behind the lines in case of Allied invasions. These companies were recruited both from Army units already deployed in the area and from local civilians. Companies were intended to be about 150 strong, forming some 12 to 15 patrols which were to be armed and equipped like the other Arditi companies. In this case, however, they were to hide in case of an Allied invasion, and let the enemy advance beyond them before starting operations. Actual experience proved to be somewhat different. In Sicily the 6^a Armata, defending the island, formed one

66-man Compagnia Speciale, assigning its patrols to non-military duties close to the coast. The men were dressed as much as possible in civilian clothing, being intended to wear their uniforms only in action, and were given a dozen mines and anti-tank bombs. Each man's task was to recruit three or four local civilians to help him on sabotage missions, but this turned out to be the main problem: following the Allied landings in July, these impromptu Arditi not only failed to get any support from the locals, but rather were betrayed by them to the Allies.

G FOREIGN VOLUNTEER UNITS

1: *Centurione, Battaglione d'Assalto 'T', Raggruppamento Freccie Rosse*; Italy, 1943

This MVSN officer, of the rank equivalent to captain, has been posted to the Tunisia Assault Battalion. He displays the Blackshirts badge (gold star, above *fascio* with silver axeblade, within wreath) on his tropical M42 peaked field cap, as well as the three cap stars of this rank. On his *Sahariana* the black MVSN shoulder boards bear a small version of the cap badge and his rank stars. Note particularly the collar insignia: the MVSN's double black 'flames', with silver *fascies*, are superimposed on this battalion's rectangular patches in Italy's red, white and green national colours. The 'red arrows' badge of the three-battalion Raggruppamento, worn on the left sleeve (1a) was introduced in August 1942. The tropical jacket is worn with an open-collared black MVSN shirt, long khaki trousers tucked into brown boots, and the usual officer's belt.

2: *Caporalmaggiore, Centro Militare 'A'*; Italy, 1942

A group of Arab volunteers from Centro 'A' was detached as an escort for the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem while he was in Italy. The pale khaki field cap bears a shield-shaped badge in red, black, white and green Arab nationalist colours, which

are repeated on the collar patches of his *camiciotto Sahariano* – these insignia were in use before the new Freccie Rosse badge was introduced. The senior lance-corporal's rank chevrons are in standard Italian Army red on grey-green. Under the field jacket he wears a tieless tropical shirt, and over it he has full infantry equipment. This includes the canteen and the M35 gas mask in its long bag – though the rifle ammo pouches are hardly suitable for the Beretta M38A that he has been issued for this duty. Note the dagger, indicating a unit of special status.

3: *Soldato, Centro Militare 'I'*; Italy, 1942

Although 'martial races' such as the Sikhs were not much represented in this small unit, soldiers wearing the turban are prominent in propaganda photographs, among other men wearing the khaki cotton field cap. The collar patches, and the left sleeve shield worn before the introduction of the Freccie Rosse badge, are in the Indian Congress Party colours of saffron, white and green. Interestingly, the Indian volunteers were not given a dagger; and the use of the Beretta M38A seems to have been casual, given the lack of any ammo pouches.



During the battle for Sicily the 'real' Arditi of X Reggimento proved their worth when used in combat, but were scarcely effective in the sabotage role. The 112^a and 113^a Compagnie Arditi of II Bn were deployed on the island in July 1943, and the latter was to distinguish itself in battles against the British Eighth Army in the race for the Catania plain. The 113^a Compagnia fought against British paratroopers dropped in the area of Acireale on 13 July and, the following day, took part in the battle for the Primosole bridge. While German paratroopers fought for the bridge, the Arditi crossed the stream in their patrol trucks and reached the hills to the south, only to face a violent reaction, and their vehicles were destroyed by British mortar fire. Eventually the Arditi were compelled to withdraw behind the stream; this action cost them five killed, four wounded and 20 missing, from a strength of 57 all ranks.

The last Arditi sabotage missions were also carried out in Sicily. Flying from the Italian mainland, some paratroop patrols were airdropped in southern Sicily on the night of 20/21 July with the aim of sabotaging Allied depots and communications centres. Few attacks were actually carried out, and most of the Arditi were taken prisoner. On the night of 24/25 July another patrol was airdropped near Catania, and successfully destroyed an ammunition dump. The last mission was performed on the night of 30/31 July by a patrol from the 112^a Compagnia, which reached Augusta by sea. Here it destroyed another ammunition dump, and, although the boat was sunk by Allied fire as the patrol tried to withdraw by sea, the Arditi managed to get back to Axis lines after an epic ten-hour swim.

On 8 August 1943 the regiment's II Bn, with the 112^a and 113^a Compagnie still numbering 33 officers and 350 other ranks with 14 Camionette, left Sicily to be deployed near Rome, at Santa Severa, where it joined the single company of III Bn and the two companies of IV Battaglione. In Rome itself there were two other companies (one each from III and IV Battaglioni). At the time of the Italian surrender in September the I Battaglione was deployed in Sardinia.

FOREIGN VOLUNTEER UNITS

Historically, Italy was a country from which large numbers of emigrants had moved to countries both nearby and far away. Before the war Italian propagandists were active in undermining British interests, both in Arab countries and among Indian independence groups; nevertheless, Italy was late to exploit both her own minorities living abroad and the political refugees who came to Italian territory from the Middle East and India. It was only in mid-1942 that volunteers from among such groups were recruited and organized into so-called Centri Militari, created under the supervision of the Comando Supremo (General Staff), Foreign Ministry, and Servizio Informazioni Militari (SIM – Military Intelligence Service). This delay was caused by a lack of interest on the part of the Army, which was only aroused eventually by German activity in the Arab countries. The first steps were taken after the failure of Raschid Ali's German-supported rebellion against the British in Iraq in spring 1941, but were limited at first to the rescue by the SIM of Amil el Husseini, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the 1937 Palestinian rebellion. (In March 1943 the Grand Mufti would also become a figurehead for German recruitment of Bosnian Muslims into the Waffen-SS.)

A few weeks after the creation of the Military Centres, on 15 July 1942, the Raggruppamento Centri Militari was formed under the command of

LtCol Massimo Invrea. The Raggruppamento comprised an HQ (with a Carabinieri and a communications section, plus a logistics squad, all manned by Italian personnel), and the Centri Militari 'A' (for Arab), 'I' (for Indian) and 'T' (for Tunisian). The Group was mainly intended to supervise training for the three Centres, with the specific purpose of preparing volunteers for espionage and sabotage missions behind Allied lines, and for infiltration and propaganda amongst native populations, thus paving the way for the future raising of local volunteer units once Axis forces had occupied Arab territories. In August 1942 the formation adopted the title Raggruppamento Frece Rosse ('Red Arrows'). This was chosen by LtCol Invrea, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and recalled the three-arrows insignia of the Spanish Falange. On 23 October 1942 the three Centri became – at least on paper – field units, entitled respectively Gruppo Formazioni 'A', Battaglione Azad Hindoustan (the former Centro 'I'), and Battaglione d'Assalto 'T'. Given the peculiarities of their histories, each will be dealt with individually.³



On 11 October 1942 a ceremony was held at Frascati, Italy, presided over by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, during which the Arab volunteers of the Centro Militare 'A' were given their colours and took their oath. (Piero Crociani Collection)

GRUPPO FORMAZIONI 'A'

The Centro Militare 'A' was formed on 1 May 1942 with Arab volunteers from Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan, as well as Iranians, and Italians who had lived in those countries. Not many Arabs were actually in Italy, mainly as political refugees or students, and by mid-August only 53 had been enlisted, along with 68 Italian volunteers, to join eight Italian officers and nine NCOs who formed the staff. A few weeks later Rommel's offensive in Libya and the invasion of Egypt aroused renewed interest in the possibilities. Once again the Grand Mufti was seen as a key pawn in Axis policy toward the Middle East, given the possibility of his return home in the aftermath of a collapse of British rule in Arab countries. Centro Militare 'A' formed a special sub-unit named Reparto Missione Speciale ('MS'), with a strength of nine Italian officers, 13 NCOs and 87 other ranks, plus six Arab officers, seven NCOs and 65 other ranks, all volunteers. The failure of the Axis offensive in front of El Alamein and the dearth of volunteers soon put an end to the project, and the Reparto 'MS' – now exclusively made up of Arab volunteers, with a total strength of 99 all ranks – remained in Naples.

Early in October 1942 the Centro 'A' and Reparto 'MS' reached a total strength of 251 all ranks. The unit now had five platoons, with the Arabs forming I Reparto Wahda, and was moved to Tivoli, near Rome, for field training. At the end of 1942 the Centro Militare 'A' was renamed Gruppo Formazioni 'A'; total strength was now 110 Arab volunteers, with 43 Italian officers, 51 NCOs and 347 other ranks. This sharp increase was achieved

³ For notes on the German-raised Deutsche-Arabishe Truppen and Legion Freies Indien, see MAA 147, *Foreign Volunteers of the Wehrmacht 1941-45*, and Elite 177, *German Special Forces of World War II*.



An Indian lance-corporal addressing fellow prisoners of war at the Avezzano camp, spring 1942. Note the collar patches and sleeve shield of the Centro Militare 'I' – see Plate G3. (Piero Crociani Collection)

by transferring into the unit all the Italians who had formerly lived in Arab countries. A further reorganization took place early in 1943. The Gruppo Formazioni now formed an HQ; Compagnia Fucilieri 'A' (rifle company, with Arab personnel, ex-I Reparto Wahda); Compagnia Esploratori-Guide (Recce & Guide Company, belatedly equipped with the *Camionetta Sahariana*); Compagnia d'Assalto; Reparto Complementi (replacement unit); and the Reparto 'MS'.

The creation of the Tunisian bridgehead to reinforce the surviving Axis forces in North Africa offered a last chance to employ the Gruppo Formazioni 'A' in a suitable area, but, for political reasons, the Italian Army decided not to use the available Arab volunteers after all. Only one of the three platoons of the Compagnia Esploratori-Guide, entirely of Italian volunteers, was sent to Tunisia, while the bulk of the Gruppo Formazioni remained in its quarters near Rome. After the fall of Tunisia in May 1943, the Gruppo Formazioni was reorganized

once again during the summer. The Compagnia Fucilieri 'A', grouping all Arab volunteers, became an independent unit, whose ranks were filled out with Italian personnel, partly trained as Arditi or Guastatori. On 15 August 1943 the Gruppo Formazioni 'A' was renamed Battaglione d'Assalto Motorizzato; its organization – still mostly on paper only – was to include a mixed Compagnia Camionettisti with patrol trucks and armoured cars, and two Compagnie d'Assalto. At the time of the Italian surrender in September 1943 the Compagnia Fucilieri 'A' was still at Frascati (incidentally, also the site of Marshal Kesselring's HQ); the Battaglione d'Assalto Motorizzato, then in Rome, fought against the German takeover.

BATTAGLIONE AZAD HINDOUSTAN

The Centro Militare 'I' was formed in April–May 1942 using Indian volunteers recruited almost exclusively in POW camps, leavened with a handful of political refugees. Located along the Via Casilina, some 10km (6 miles) from Rome, it was initially disguised as a POW camp, until given its official designation on 15 July 1942. It was soon clear that the actual composition of the volunteers, who were mostly second-line personnel not belonging to the 'martial races' (i.e. not Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Gurkhas, Garhwalis, Dogras, Rajputs, etc) seriously undermined any possible development of the Centro Militare 'I'. The unit was competing for manpower with the German-raised *Legion Freies Indien* (see footnote 3); but Iqbal Sheday, the Rome representative of the Indian National Congress, was more interested in its political and propaganda role than its combat potential. Despite a series of recruitment drives in POW camps in Italy, the strength of the Centro Militare 'I' increased only slowly; up to 31 August 1942 just 193 Indian volunteers had joined the four Italian officers and 11 other ranks, forming three platoons.

The Indian volunteers received only basic infantry training, apart from a selected 44 men who, in mid-September 1942, were sent to Tarquinia for the parachute course. Some other promising individuals were also sent to North Africa, where they co-operated with Italian field intelligence personnel.

At the end of September 1942 there were a total of 266 Indian volunteers – the peak strength of the Centro ‘T’ – which formed one paratroop, one machine-gun, and four rifle platoons. In October the Centro was reorganized once more; renamed Battaglione Azad Hindoustan (Free India Battalion), it included one rifle and one machine-gun company and a paratroop platoon, all of Indian volunteers, plus a platoon of Italians who had lived in either India or Persia. Still in the process of forming, on 21–30 October the battalion took part in field exercises near Tivoli, where the poor quality of the Indian volunteers became clear; it was remarked that while keen to fraternize with Italian civilians when off duty, they showed little eagerness to fight. A visit on 7 November 1942 by the Indian nationalist leader Subas Chandra Bose was followed by the unit’s final collapse. On 10 November – a week after the Axis defeat at El Alamein – a passive mutiny took place during the roll-call, when the Indian volunteers simply failed to show up. Immediately afterwards they were disarmed and sent to POW camps, while the Battaglione Azad Hindoustan was disbanded.

BATTAGLIONE D’ASSALTO ‘T’

The only foreign volunteer unit that did not prove to be a complete failure was the Centro Militare ‘T’, although the volunteers’ partial training for infiltration and sabotage was wasted when they were committed to action as simple infantry.

Tunisia, where Italian immigrants were as numerous as French, provided the largest recruitment pool for Italian minorities. After the outbreak of war hundreds of them came back to Italy to join the armed forces, and many eventually volunteered for the Centro Militare ‘T’ after its creation at the end of July 1942. That August the Centro still had a strength of only eight officers, six NCOs and 22 volunteers; but volunteers started to arrive in October and, in late November, total strength had risen to 51 officers, 39 NCOs and 374 volunteers. Following the Allied *Torch* landings in French North-West Africa more Italians arrived from Tunisia as well as from Algeria and Morocco, bringing total strength up to 588 all ranks in December 1942. Although some selected volunteers were trained for special operations, only a few of them were sent back to Tunisia to operate with Italian Army field intelligence. In late December the bulk of the Centro Militare ‘T’ was used to create the Battaglione d’Assalto ‘T’. This unit had three all-volunteer Compagnie Assaltatori, plus a company of Fascist Blackshirts militiamen recruited in Tunisia.

The unofficial flag of the Azad Hindoustan Battalion; note the shoulder belt of the standard-bearer, in the same colours of saffron, white and green. (Piero Crociani Collection)





An interesting portrait of an Italian officer attached to Assault Battalion 'T' from a paratroop unit, as shown by his doubled collar insignia combining the battalion's Italian tricolour patch and the paratroopers' winged-sword patch. Note also on his M42 tropical field cap the Frece Rosse badge of three red arrows crossing a circle – see Plate G1a. (Piero Crociani Collection)

In January 1943 the HQ of the Raggruppamento Frece Rosse and the Battaglione d'Assalto 'T' (including HQ, the three companies, and a mixed unit, totalling about 450 all ranks) were sent to Tunisia. Deployed at the front on 25 January, the battalion faced an attack by US forces that cost it 22 killed, 43 wounded and 36 missing. Although the losses were soon made good thanks to the availability of a large number of Italian volunteers from Tunisia, casualties would lead to the unit's reduction to two companies.

REGGIMENTO VOLONTARI TUNISINI

After the Axis created their bridgehead, about 4,000 Italians still living in Tunisia volunteered into the Italian Army, which used them to create in Tunis, on 8 December 1942, the Reggimento Volontari Tunisini. The regiment, of three battalions, was attached to the Superga Infantry Division but, due to high losses, it was disbanded in January 1943. Some 200 of its survivors were used to fill out the Battaglione d'Assalto 'T', while a I and an XI Battaglione Volontari Tunisini were also formed

from other remnants of the Reggimento Volontari Tunisini and recent intakes of new volunteers. (The I Battaglione was composed of younger and the XI mostly of older volunteers). The HQ of the Reggimento Volontari Tunisini was used to create the HQ of the Raggruppamento Volontari Tunisini, which was to have under command both the above-mentioned battalions and the DLXX Battaglione Camicie Nere (Blackshirts Battalion).

From February 1943 the two-company Battaglione d'Assalto 'T' and the two Volontari Tunisini battalions fought separately on the Tunisian front until the surrender that May. Total losses of the Battaglione d'Assalto 'T' during the campaign were 65 killed, 161 wounded and 96 missing.

BLACKSHIRTS SEA-LANDING & ARMoured UNITS

Although technically not part of the Italian Army, but of the Fascist MVSN militia, two Blackshirts units have been included here, not only because they were organized and employed within the framework of the Army, but also because of the peculiarities that made them unique amongst Army and Blackshirts units.

GRUPPO BATTAGLIONI DA SBARCO

The Group of Sea-Landing Battalions was in fact the only specifically trained seaborne assault unit of the Italian armed forces apart from the Navy's San Marco Marine Regiment. Although its creation was already envisaged in late October 1940, in the wake of a general reorganization of the Blackshirts legions and battalions (mostly subordinated to Army divisions), the actual creation of the Gruppo Battaglioni took place only in February 1941, when four Blackshirts battalions (XLII, XLIII, L, and LX) were grouped together. The group's first operation was the seizure of the Greek Ionian islands in late April 1941, at the time of the Greek surrender, along with the company of paratroopers from 2° Battaglione Paracadutisti (see above).

On 1 October 1941 the group was selected to be part of the new wave of elite Blackshirts 'M' battalions ('M' for Mussolini). Since most of these 'M' battalions had neither special training nor equipment, the sea-landing group became something of an elite amongst them. With a total strength of about 3,100 and an extra allowance of eight 47/32 AT guns in the attached gun company, in addition to the Blackshirts battalions' standard scale of 42 machine guns and 36 light mortars, the Gruppo Battaglioni 'M' da Sbarco was chosen to be part of the planned seaborne assault against the island of Malta. Training began in January 1942, with exercises held (along with Army and Navy units) at first on the coasts of Tuscany, then on the coasts of Liguria in June–July. Specific training included the use of fire-brigade ladders – the only solution available for landings on Malta's tall coastal cliffs. To a limited extent some special individual equipment was also made available, in the form of a certain number of Beretta M38A sub-machine guns, and the special 'Samurai' load-carrying vests used to carry extra magazines and hand grenades.

Following the abandonment in late July 1942 of the plan to invade Malta, the Gruppo Battaglioni 'M' da Sbarco was held in reserve until November 1942, when it was used in the bloodless seizure of Corsica after the Allied landings in French North-West Africa. In January 1943 the Gruppo Battaglioni was split in two: the XLIII and LX battalions remained in Corsica to perform garrison and security duties, while the HQ, along with the XLII and L battalions, were sent to southern France and deployed in the Toulon area. The two groups were to take different paths after the Italian surrender in September 1943. The units in Corsica fought against the Germans, and eventually joined the pro-Allied Italian Co-Belligerent forces; those in southern France mostly joined the Germans and, after forming a Battaglione IX Settembre, operated against Italian partisans alongside a battalion of German 'Brandenburgers'.

MVSN Console Generale Santi Quasimodo, the commander of the Blackshirts Sea-Landing Group; his rank was the equivalent of brigadier-general. The insignia of the Group – see Plate H1 – is worn on the left upper sleeve; the fact that *fascies* alone are worn on the black 'two-flame' collar patches, without the red 'M' for Mussolini, suggests that this photo was taken in 1941. (Piero Crociani Collection)





1^a DIVISIONE CORAZZATA CAMICIE NERE 'M'

Between 1940 and 1943 the Germans supplied a certain amount of weaponry and equipment to the Italian Army, both of captured French and German models – most notably, anti-aircraft guns including the 8.8cm Flak and, from late 1942, 5cm and 7.5cm anti-tank guns. However, no Italian Army unit had ever been equipped with German armoured fighting vehicles, in spite of attempts made either to secure these or to build them under licence.

In May 1943, after the loss of the last foothold in North Africa, Hitler became concerned about Mussolini's personal security, and decided to take action. Through the SS leader Heinrich Himmler, he had a certain number of AFVs and weapons delivered to the MVSN militia with the express intent of creating a formation to act as a sort of '*Leibstandarte* equivalent' for Mussolini. Up to this date Mussolini had never really had a dedicated bodyguard unit, apart from a flamboyant – and completely useless – special corps within the Blackshirts known as the Moschettieri del Duce ('The Leader's Musketeers').

The 1^a Divisione Corazzata Camicie Nere 'M' (1st Blackshirts Armoured Division 'M') was officially formed on 25 June 1943, with an establishment – on paper – of about 5,700 all ranks. It was to be made up of a tank regiment, the Gruppo Carri Leonessa; two regiment-sized Gruppi Battaglioni, formed from veterans of the Eastern Front – the Gruppo Tagliamento (XLI, LXIII & LXXIX Blackshirts battalions), and Gruppo Montebello (VI, XII & XXX battalions); the two-battalion Valle Scrivia artillery regiment; a combat engineer battalion, a sapper and a signals company, plus divisional services. The division's core strength was to be the German-supplied AFVs. These included 12x Panzer III Ausf N tanks (with the short-barrelled 7.5cm gun), 12x Panzer IV Ausf G (with the long 7.5cm gun), and 12x Sturmgeschütz III assault guns (with the long 7.5cm). In addition, 24x 8.8cm dual-purpose AA/AT guns, and 24 flamethrowers, were also to be supplied.

However, despite the support of German instructors, the lack of experienced personnel – in particular of tank and SP-gun crews, after the heavy losses in North Africa – greatly delayed the division's training and

H BLACKSHIRTS 'MUSSOLINI' UNITS

1: *Camicia Nera, Gruppo Battaglioni 'M' da Sbarco; Italy, 1942*

The 'M' sea-landing battalions wore the Army's standard European M40 uniform, with the black MVSN shirt, and special insignia. The black helmet stencil is as the cap badge described under Plate G1; the collar insignia are black 'double flames' bearing a red script 'M' entwined with a silver *fascio*; and the Sea-Landing Group badge (1a) is worn on the left sleeve. The other indication of this man's status is the MVSN dagger worn on his belt. He carries the Army's full field marching order, including a backpack with rolled blanket and camouflaged tent-quarter, and a canteen, gas mask and 'bread bag' haversack. His weapon is the M91 carbine.

2 & 3: *Light machine-gun team, Divisione Corazzata 'M'; Italy, 1943*

The three-man team for the Breda M30 could be reduced to two, with one soldier carrying the gun and the cleaning kit pouch, and the other carrying both the spares and barrel case on his back, and ammunition boxes – normally carried on the back by the third man in the team – in his hands.

This two-man team are shown wearing two different versions of the Army's grey fatigue uniform.

2: This Blackshirt, sporting the MVSN's soft black fez with a long hanging tassel, has the fatigue jacket with chest pockets and the trousers of baggier cut, worn over a grey-green turtle-neck sweater; no insignia are visible. He has standard Army rifle equipment, and is armed with an MVSN dagger as well as the M91 TS carbine, with its separate knife-bayonet. The green-painted wooden ammo box bore white stencilling: (left), 'per CARICATORI/di FUCILE/MITRAGLIATORE', and (right) 'FIAT/M. 1926 e M. 1928/BREDA/M. 29 e M. 30/e M.C.'. The case for exchange barrels, spares and accessories was marked on the back surface 'per ACCESS. e RICAMBI/di FUCILE MITRAG. re BREDA/M. 29 e M. 30'.

3: This *camicia nera* has the same stencil on his helmet as H1, and the pattern of fatigue jacket with hip pockets, worn with narrower trousers; note the 'M' battalions' collar insignia. As the gun 'No.1' he has the M30's cleaning pouch on his belt, with a holstered M34 pistol for self-defence.



Summer 1943. Crews from the 'Lioness' Tank Regt of the 1st Blackshirts Armd Div 'M' during training with one of its dozen German Pzkw III Ausf N tanks, mounting a short-barrelled 7.5cm gun for infantry support. The divisional insignia is clearly visible on the spaced turret armour. (P.P. Battistelli Collection)

actual formation. By the time that Mussolini was deposed on 25 July 1943 the division had not yet reached operational status, which may explain why it did not react to these events. Nevertheless, the Italian Army staff naturally considered it completely unreliable, and took precautionary measures. Since, during this hiatus between Mussolini's downfall and the announcement of Italy's capitulation to the Allies, the units could not be disbanded without alarming the Germans, they were reorganized, with many MVSN officers being replaced by Army ones. On 15 August 1943 the division was officially renamed 136^a Divisione Corazzata Legionaria Centauro II, still deployed east of Rome. After the Italian surrender on 8 September 1943 many of the Eastern Front veterans joined the Germans, who also took back every single piece of equipment and every tank and weapon that they had supplied only a few months previously.

UNIFORMS AND PERSONAL EQUIPMENT

The basic M40 uniform of the Italian Army comprised a field cap (*bustina*); a grey-green woollen jacket, with an open collar, shoulder straps, three front buttons, four pleated and flapped pockets, and an integral cloth belt; a grey-green shirt (worn without a necktie after June 1940); and grey-green wool trousers, worn with puttees over black leather boots. The tropical uniform was basically of the same cut, but made of a lighter fabric in khaki colour. It was not unusual for Italian soldiers to wear their European woollen

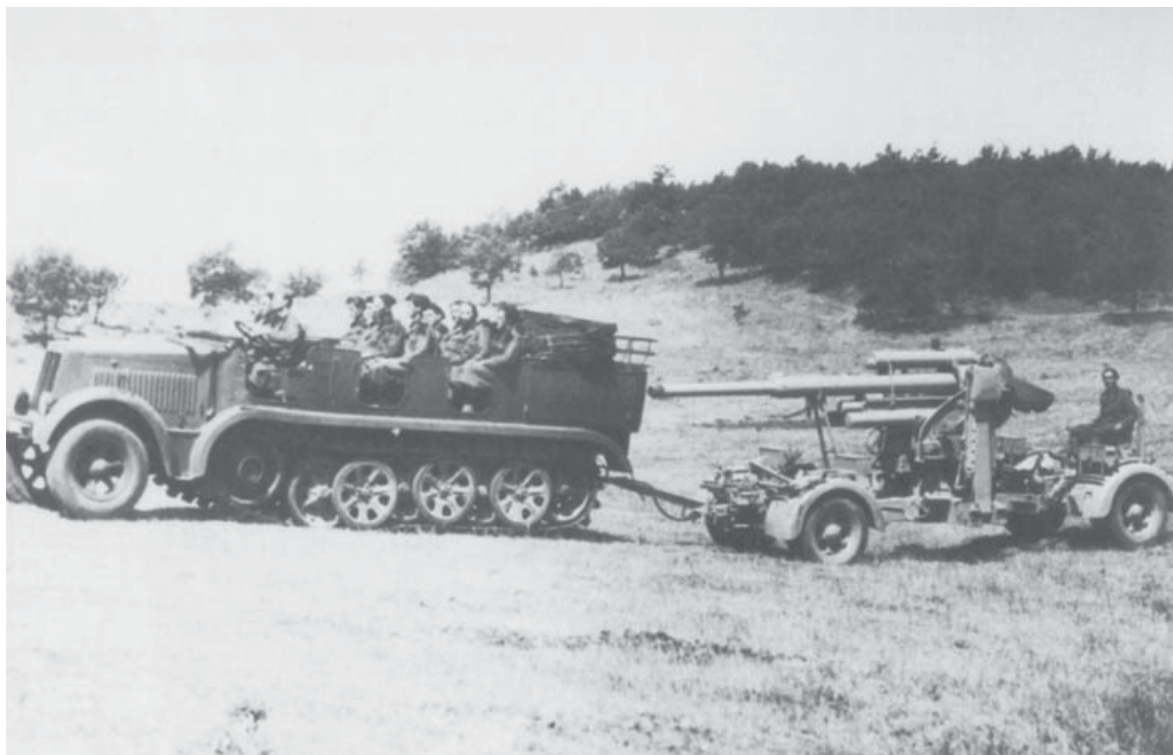
uniform in North Africa, particularly in winter, and also when units were hastily transferred from Italy.

The officer's European service uniform was of paler shades of fine grey or grey-green gabardine cloth, but in the field many wore versions resembling those of the enlisted ranks. Officers were authorized a superior field cap with a fold-down front flap/visor. In Africa they wore a colonial jacket called the '*Sahariana*' made of khaki cotton; this had a shirt-type collar that could be worn open or buttoned, and buttoned wrist bands, but its most characteristic feature was the extension right across the chest of 'winged' pocket flaps. This very comfortable and popular item was worn with breeches and riding boots, as also worn by officers with their European uniform. Many chose to retain the pre-1940 officers' shoulder boards of rank and branch on the *Sahariana* rather than changing to the regulation forearm rank badges, presumably because the former were easier to remove for the frequent washing needed by the tropical jacket. With both uniforms officers used a 'Sam Browne'-style brown leather belt with a brace worn across the right shoulder. Some variations of the *Sahariana* were produced, including versions lacking the characteristic extended pocket flaps but retaining the loose cut and shirt-type collar and cuffs. One such was the so-called *camiciotto Sahariano*, a pullover garment with a short front aperture, which was issued to enlisted ranks as a field jacket.

Fatigue uniform also saw widespread use. This existed in two different versions, both of a grey colour; the earlier type had a jacket with an open collar and two flapped hip pockets, while the later pattern – loosely cut in the Saharan style – had a closed collar and two flapped chest pockets.

Basic personal equipment included a leather belt, either black or painted grey-green for the European uniform, with a leather front brace passing up

Another important German weapon provided for the fledgling Blackshirts armoured division was the '88' – the lethally effective 8.8cm Flak 36 AA/AT gun, here being towed by an SdKfz 7 halftrack prime mover of the division during training east of Rome. (P.P. Battistelli Collection)



and around the neck to support the weight of the two standard rifle ammunition pouches. For use with tropical uniform a brown leather version was produced. Instead of the belt pouches, mounted personnel and those serving with motorized and mechanized units were issued a broad leather bandolier with either two or three elongated pouches, worn across the chest and over the left shoulder; a pistol holster could be attached to a hook at its lower end, on the right side. Basic field equipment included a canteen, a gas mask in its bag (no longer standard issue from 1942), a bread bag (haversack), a bayonet in a frogged scabbard, and a knapsack, usually worn with a rolled blanket, and the rolled M29 tent-quarter camouflage-printed in three colours – khaki-yellow, sage green and a reddish brown. Standard small arms were the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano M91 rifle, two carbine variants with and without a folding integral bayonet, and the 9mm Beretta M34 semi-automatic pistol, although the old 10.35mm M89 Glisenti six-shot revolver was also sometimes seen. It is generally agreed that the best Italian-made personal weapon of the war was the 9mm Beretta M38A sub-machine gun; much sought-after, this was more widely issued to elite and special troops than to the line infantry.

BRANCH-SPECIFIC ITEMS

Some special clothing was produced during the pre-war years. This included the overalls used by personnel of motorized and mechanized units – a simple one-piece mechanic's suit in blue material, usually worn by AFV crews with a long double-breasted black leather jacket and a leather crash helmet. New AFV crew overalls introduced in the summer–autumn of 1941 had zipped thigh pockets and, in one of the available variations, padded elbows and knees.

A protective two-piece suit was also produced for flamethrower operators; but perhaps the most interesting pre-war item was the canvas overall issued to the Libyan paratroopers of the *Fanti dell'Aria*, developed from an Air Force model. Generally, the Italian Army did not start production of special clothing for its elite or special forces until late 1941, and it was not until 1942 that these were in widespread use. This explains why in 1940 most Italian paratroopers wore simple tracksuits during their training. The first jumpsuit issued was a simple grey overall, without the zipped pockets that characterized those already in use by the Libyan paratroopers. Later, from spring 1941, a new model was introduced in the style of the German *Fallschirmjäger's* jumpsmock. This was a three-quarter length combination worn over the uniform; available at first in plain grey, it was also produced in the standard Italian three-colour camouflage scheme.

This jumpsmock was also used by special forces, in particular by the *Arditi*, who also wore the special paratroopers' grey-green service uniform introduced in September–October 1941. This was cut in the same style as the *Sahariana* jacket, with the characteristic 'winged' pocket flaps, but its most noticeable feature was the absence of a collar. From the summer–early autumn of 1942 this was also produced in a tropical version made from lightweight khaki cotton. This cut of uniform came to characterize Italian special forces as well as the *paracadutisti*.

Paratroopers were also supplied with a variety of special ammunition pouches, mostly made of canvas, but the old paired leather pouches were still used. These canvas rigs were mainly load-carrying vests with multiple pouches; the most widely used type was the so-called 'Samurai' (nicknamed

from its supposed resemblance to medieval Japanese splinted armour), which could accommodate up to ten magazines for the M38A sub-machine gun in horizontal pouches across the chest and back, and – in some examples – hand grenades in a row of small pouches around the bottom. Its use was not limited to paratroopers; it was also supplied to the Blackshirts' Gruppo Battaglioni da Sbarco. Peculiar to the paratroopers of the Folgore Division was an alternative special belt-and-braces rig with two rows of canvas pouches.

As mentioned in the chapter devoted to the unit, the Monte Cervino Ski Battalion also had a whole array of special clothing and equipment items, which made it a rarity in the Italian Army. Generally speaking, elite branches of service – armoured and motorized, and the *Guastatori* – were not provided with any special uniforms or equipment, but several badges and insignia were introduced for them. These were to denote either the award of a qualification brevet – usually worn on the left sleeve, such as the paratrooper and *Guastatori* badges – or membership of a specific unit, in which case they might be either arm badges or special designs of collar patches.⁴

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⁴ For fuller details of Italian Army uniforms, insignia and equipment up to the September 1943 capitulation, see MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940–45 (1): Europe 1940–43*; and MAA 349, *The Italian Army 1940–45 (2): Africa 1940–43*.

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ACS = Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome; USSME = Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Rome; EG Vitetti = Count Ernesto G. Vitetti

AUTHORS' NOTE

In the Italian language, male nouns (generally ending in 'o' or 'e') usually take a final 'i' in the plural (e.g., sing. *divisione*, pl. *divisioni*); female nouns (ending in 'a') take a final 'e' (e.g., sing. *compagnia*, pl. *compagnie*). Collective titles such as *Bersaglieri* and *Arditi* are plural. The basic formations, units and sub-units are the army (*armata*), army corps (*corpo d'armata*), division (*divisione*), regiment (*reggimento*) and its equivalent group (*gruppo* or *raggruppamento*), battalion (*battaglione*), company (*compagnia*), platoon (*plotone*), and squad (*squadra*). Ordinal numbers are indicated by a final superior 'o' when referring to male noun (e.g. 1^o Divisione) or 'a' with female nouns (e.g. 2^a Compagnia).

In addition to the related titles shown on the inside back cover, readers are recommended to these other Osprey titles: WAR 144, *Italian Blackshirts 1935–45*; and the sequence MAA 340, *The Italian Army 1940–45* (1): *Europe 1940–43*; MAA 349... (2): *Africa 1940–43*, and MAA 353 ... (3): *Italy 1943–45*.

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